

BEYOND TODAY

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Disciples first and foremost

Whatever tasks were later assigned to Christ's followers, they remained, primarily, His students.

In the Bible, those who profess to follow Jesus Christ are described in various ways including the elect, Christians, saints and firstfruits. Some terms are more frequently used than others. Most often applied is the word "disciple" appearing 274 times, primarily in the plural. This is more than all the other expressions put together, even if "in Christ" or those of "the Way" are included. The label "Christian" occurs only twice in the New Testament and "Christians" just once.

Vine's Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words describes a disciple as "not only a pupil, but an adherent ... spoken of as imitators of their teacher." Disciples did not simply acquire knowledge from their tutor; rather, they learned to be like him.

This fits with what we read in Scripture. Christ tells those who would be His followers, "If you abide in My word, you are My disciples indeed" (John 8:31). Those who follow His word as a way of life are His disciples. Paul, a disciple of Christ, urged the Corinthians to "imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1).

We must remember that we are disciples of God. We can follow the example of others so long as it agrees with the example of Christ. Nevertheless, our goal must always be to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and forever. Amen" (2 Peter 3:18).

Multiple followers

Many followed Christ. Luke 6:12-13 explains: "Now it

came to pass in those days that He went out to the mountain to pray, and continued all night in prayer to God. And when it was day, He called His disciples to Himself; and from them He chose twelve whom He also named apostles." These apostles came from a much larger group of disciples. Apostle means "delegate, messenger, one sent forth with orders" (*Thayer's Greek Definitions*).

Whilst all the apostles were disciples, not all disciples were apostles.

All but one of those twelve apostles remained faithful after their calling, and those eleven witnessed His death and resurrection. Judas Iscariot was replaced as described in Acts 1:12-26. Even after all they had observed, some still doubted Him (Matthew 28:16-17).

John 6:66 also reveals that there were numerous disciples. After a particularly hard teaching "... many of His disciples went back and walked with Him no more." At the Feast of Pentecost following His resurrection 120 disciples gathered and were the first recipients of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:15; 2:1-4).

Whilst all the apostles were disciples, not all disciples were apostles. Within the congregations were elders – variously called bishops, pastors and the presbytery, depending on the Bible translation (Acts 8:18; 1 Timothy 4:14). Additionally, there were those who held less public, but no less important, roles as teachers, administrators,

deacons and deaconesses (1 Corinthians 12:28; Philippians 1:1). Everyone was allowed to play a part. Paul further explained: “But, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head – Christ – from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love” (Ephesians 4:15-16).

Traditional leadership denounced

Jesus rarely spoke about leadership, except in somewhat negative terms. In one example, He responded to the disciples’ egos thus: “Now there was also a dispute among them, as to which of them should be considered the greatest. And He said to them, ‘The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those who exercise authority over them are called “benefactors.” But not so among you;

on the contrary, he who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves. For who is greater, he who sits at the table, or he who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? Yet I am among you as the One who serves” (Luke 22:24-27).

The soon-coming King of the earth stressed the need to become a servant, as He was. Thus, it may be more appropriate to focus upon the implications of being a disciple as opposed to a leader or a ruler.

Jesus left this instruction to His followers. He said to them, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples” (Matthew 28:18-19). These men and women had a part in the initial founding of the Church. That work continues today.

To study this topic further please request or download our study aid *The Church Jesus Built*.

David Fenney

Personal opinions are just that

Religious, political or social views can all produce strong opinions. Expressing such views, especially forcefully, can lead to division, and even persecution.

Highly opinionated people tend to irritate those who disagree with them and, conversely, attract those of a similar persuasion. As this world moves further away from God and His laws, Christians may find themselves wondering how to explain God’s teachings, without causing offence or being labelled a fanatic. Two simple rules lessen the chance for conflict, without boosting our egos by promoting our own ideas.

Be wary of stating your own opinion

Opinions, no matter how strongly held, are just that – opinions. If we do not argue with someone else’s viewpoint, it does not mean that we agree, or disagree with it. We are simply keeping our own counsel, as when Jesus met with Herod (Luke 23:8-9).

When an opportunity presented itself, Jesus Christ did not offer an opinion of His own but quoted Scripture, deferring to the higher authority of God the Father. He did this in His encounter with Satan the devil as recorded in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. Three times He responded to Satan’s tempting words with Scripture, even in one case calmly correcting the devil’s attempt to pervert

the meaning of a particular passage (Matthew 4:3-10).

It is better to quote the Almighty to explain why we walk with Him as He commanded (2 John 1:4). In this way we turn attention to His opinion and not our own. If our views do not coincide with God’s they are of no relevance anyway (Isaiah 55:8-9; 66:1-2).

Softly, softly

When sending twelve of His disciples out on a preaching tour, Jesus warned them, “Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore, be wise as serpents and harmless as doves” (Matthew 10:16).

In the bird world, doves are softly spoken. Proverbs tells us, “A soft answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger” (Proverbs 15:1). There is a way to respond to others using the fruit of God’s Holy Spirit such as patience and self-control. We do not need to join in someone else’s argument, but instead should have our emotions under control. We can avoid much conflict if we keep our own counsel and express God’s word in a softly, softly manner. To learn more please request our free booklet *Making Life Work*.

Alex Preston

God's truth is absolute

If one person's truth is another's fallacy how are we to discern right from wrong, or perceive a lie or deception?

Many today believe truth is relative to circumstances – that what is true for one situation is not necessarily true for another. If this is correct, how can we know with certainty what to believe and how we should live? To claim there is no such thing as absolute truth must itself be a false statement.

There is one God, who explains His way of life that leads to eternal life. Through the pages of the Bible, He states that absolute truth *does* exist. In John 17:17, Christ affirms to His Father: “Your word is truth.”

Obeying that word sets Christ’s disciples apart from the rest of mankind. By God’s grace we can learn the truth on any subject of significance. Most importantly, we understand why we are born and placed here on earth, and what the future holds for humanity. This priceless knowledge will be made available to the rest of mankind at a later time. God’s truth is valid and applicable in all circumstances. However, it can slip from our grasp if we don’t hold fast and make it a part of our lives.

Deception to abound

As we approach the end of the age, Scripture warns of deceitfulness increasing in intensity. Revelation 12:9 explains the source of these lies: “So the great dragon was cast out, that serpent of old, called the Devil and Satan, who deceives the whole world; he was cast to the earth, and his angels were cast out with him.”

In John 17:17, Christ affirms to His Father: “Your word is truth.”

This is a monumental revelation. There are spiritual forces fighting against the truth so that humans will not believe God. Some are convinced that Satan is a myth. Atheists believe there is no God. Even in the area of religion countless people assume they have “discovered” the truth but it is often an idea that Satan and his demon cohorts have implanted in their minds. If you don’t know God or His truth, and don’t earnestly seek it, Satan is satisfied.

Of the demon-influenced power to arise at the end of the age, the apostle Paul warns: “The coming of the



Scripture warns us to be wary of “wolves in sheep’s clothing” – false religious teachers.

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lawless one is according to the working of Satan, with all power, signs, and lying wonders, and with all unrighteous deception among those who perish, because they did not receive the love of the truth, that they might be saved” (2 Thessalonians 2:9-10). God is the source of truth.

Ideas, statements and opinions that do not concur with His Word should be queried regarding their truthfulness. God expects us to act on the truth as He helps us learn it.

Our calling provides us with precious knowledge, about which the world knows little or nothing. We must beware, be alert, as through the deceived populace Satan can trick us into doubting God. Many know those who were of the Way, living God’s truth, but, later turned their back on the Creator because they were deceived.

Jesus prophesied: “For then there will be great tribulation, such as has not been since the beginning of the world until this time, no, nor ever shall be. And unless those days were shortened, no flesh would be saved; but for the elect’s [God’s faithful disciples’] sake those days will be shortened. Then if anyone says to you, ‘Look, here is the Christ!’ or ‘There!’ do not believe it. For false christ and false prophets will rise and show great signs and wonders to deceive, if possible, even the elect” (Matthew 24:21-24).

To be forewarned is to be forearmed. God’s truth is our sure defence against deception. His instructions found in His word are neither relative nor variable. They are truth absolute. Let’s learn, love and live the truth.

Ademola Adesupo

Pilate's query about truth

At this distance in time, we cannot know why Pontius Pilate did not wait for an answer to his question to Christ (John 18:37-38). Nevertheless, the Bible explains what truth is.

Over the past few years, I have increasingly realised that God's thoughts and logic are not vague, nor do they change with different situations. In fact, His way is as clear cut as you can get.

Have you noticed the increasing number of movies that show lying to be okay, even beneficial for the hero's or heroine's journey, excluding any hint of potential consequences? How many TV characters also avoid saying the complete truth – which is a lie through omission? You may be as surprised as I am at how often this subtle reinforcement of dishonesty is interwoven throughout our media.

Do you consider yourself an embodiment of integrity and honesty? Are you upfront with everything and everyone in your life, no matter how difficult? Would you be able to stand up right now and shout that from the rooftops?

These are tough questions! Not only do we contend with our human nature, but we are immersed in a lukewarm, postmodern society that places diminishing importance on the ideal of truth, emphasising instead that there are no absolutes.

A lack of honesty abounds

This subject was on my mind whilst working as a high school teacher. I have been frustrated by the number of lies I was told by a majority of students to whom lying is almost second nature. "I forgot my book, but I did do the assignment." I would have done anything for some truthful students.

But what is truth exactly? Is it just something that is imprinted on your conscience? Is it subjective? The fact of the matter is that without a universally agreed system for what is classified as truth, we could debate these questions forever. Does such a system even exist?

Amazingly, God's commandments have inspired and helped form our modern democratic legal system. King David realised the perfection of these laws when he declared, "All Your commandments are truth" (Psalm 119:151).

You want to know what truth is? True truth is God's commandments. You want to live a truthful life, full of integrity? Follow God's commandments.

Could it really be that "simple"?

Let's look at some examples where we may struggle with being fully truthful.

- **School, university and work.** If something goes wrong and it's your fault, will you stand up and speak the truth? Are you honest with your peers about your values, or do you adapt to fit in with them?

- **Dating.** Are you truthful about your intentions? Are you 100 percent honest about your past? Are you always open about your present issues and future direction? Since Christ's followers are instructed to "flee sexual immorality" (1 Corinthians 6:18), are you faithful to that standard?

- **With yourself.** Do you take the time to analyse your behaviours and take full responsibility for your actions and life? God knows everything, but do you endeavour to be completely truthful with Him in your prayer life?

The above questions can be difficult to ask ourselves – and even more challenging to face and change. But the

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benefits of completely following God's way are not only long-term but can be positive for us right now. Just think of how many misunderstandings, damaged reputations, bruised hearts and painful discussions could be avoided were we always truthful.

Remember Christ's promise that in His Kingdom: "There shall by no means enter it anything that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie" (Revelation 21:27). A promise reiterated in the next chapter: "But outside are dogs and sorcerers and sexually immoral and murderers and idolaters, and whoever loves and practises a lie" (Revelation 22:15).

Let's take a stand now and focus on having truth and honesty as the very core of our character. Let's seek to eliminate all deceit from our lives and follow Christ's example when He said, "I am . . . the truth" (John 14:6).

Sarah Gray

Adapted from an article in Vertical Thought

A 24/7 society has casualties

We live in a world which affects us profoundly on many levels.

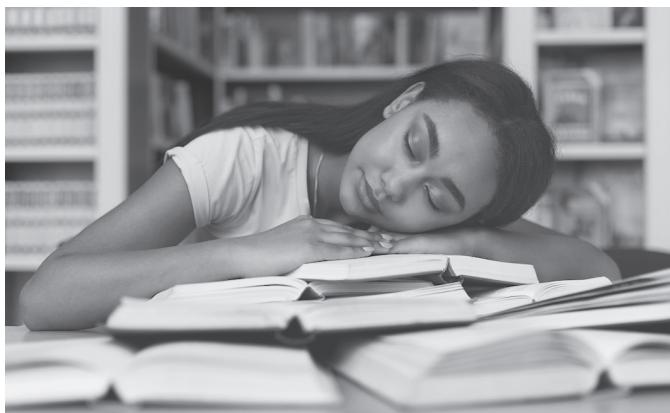
The prophet Daniel was told by an angelic messenger that at the time of the end, meaning when God Almighty intervenes in the affairs of men, the world would be in full gear assimilating increasing amounts of knowledge. As a result, life has become progressively more complex over the last hundred years or so.

The digital age is providing us with smart phones that store an unfathomable amount of information, far beyond the need and capacity of many users. This “explosion” of accessible knowledge is alluded to in the Bible, where the prophet Daniel is told to “seal the book until the time of the end, and many shall run to and fro, and knowledge shall increase” (Daniel 12:4). A very accurate prophecy for today, written well over 2000 years ago.

Instituted at Creation

Living a 24/7 lifestyle robs us of time to reflect on what is important and of great value in the eyes of the Almighty. One serious casualty in today's society is the failure to take the time to worship God collectively on the rest day established at Creation: “Then God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it, because in it He rested from all His work . . .” (Genesis 2:3).

Although resting on the seventh-day Sabbath was divinely instituted at Creation, it was codified at the time of the Exodus. At Sinai keeping the Sabbath holy was highlighted with the word “remember” (Exodus 20:8).



Burn out requires the weekly reset God instituted at Creation.

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Never forget that the Sabbath is one of those ten “written with the finger of God” (Exodus 31:18). “Now the tablets were the work of God, and the writing was the writing of God engraved on the tablets” (Exodus 32:15-16). This shows the importance of the Ten Commandments in the worship of the Creator.

Taking time to rest from labour on the day commanded allows us to recuperate from any stress caused by overloading our bodies and minds. Keeping the seventh day holy means that we have time already set aside for worship, and for studying the Bible. Not working on the Sabbath to earn a living allows us to have more free time for family. Reserving the one day of the week He Himself ordained for worship allows us extra time to reflect on our destiny as children of God.

A legacy and a birthright

This is God's legacy for all human beings, a birthright as we are reminded in His inspired Word, the Bible. The physical rest of the weekly Sabbath looks forward to our redemption in the Kingdom of God. Through the receipt of the Holy Spirit we are begotten in the image of God with the prospect of attaining His character traits and being born into His family at the resurrection. Thus, we need to take time to learn and develop divine attributes that are pleasing in His sight. The apostle John refers to the part we have to play in living such a life: “Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says ‘I know Him’ and does not keep His commandments, is a liar and the truth is not in him” (1 John 2:3-4). Strong words, clearly expressed. We have an obligation to base our lives on the Ten Commandments and other laws of God revealed in His Word.

We must follow what the Bible says rather than the traditions of men. In Isaiah 45:19 God Almighty states categorically: “I, the LORD, speak righteousness. I declare things that are right.” The traditions of men have little if any value in deciding what is right and what is wrong. That remains God's prerogative.

To study this topic further and how it relates to our destiny in God's Kingdom, please request or download our study aid *Sunset to Sunset: God's Sabbath Rest*.

Gerhard Marx

The eternal value of work

Quite purposefully, God assigned a task to Adam in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2:15).

God desires that we find pleasure even in the simplest of tasks and that we enjoy the fruit of our labours (Psalm 128:2). But He also wants us to understand the ultimate purpose of work.

Just what is that great purpose? As incredible as it may seem, God's people in this age are preparing to serve alongside Jesus Christ as kings and priests when He establishes the Kingdom of God on earth (Revelation 2:26; 5:10). Jesus spoke about giving His Spirit-born, faithful followers authority over cities (Luke 19:17, 19).

In the end, all of mankind will be offered a place in God's Kingdom, which is ultimately His eternal, divine family. Those who accept God's offer will inherit the entire universe, being coheirs with Christ of all things (Romans 8:17, 32). (For much more on this incredible future, be sure to request or download our free booklet *Why Were You Born?*) We will be engaged in rewarding accomplishment for eternity.

Yet, how can we be training for such amazing work in God's future government on the earth and ultimately over the entire universe if we have spent our career as

a truck driver, homemaker, computer technician or in another profession? Well, perhaps we won't use the specific technical skills we learned in those occupations, but we can certainly apply the positive work habits we have developed. Habits such as punctuality, determination, reliability, patience, organisation, thoughtfulness, cooperation and teamwork will stand us in good stead for the awesome future that awaits us.

God scrutinises our performance and attitude in whatever work we do now as we demonstrate how we will carry out our responsibilities for all eternity (Luke 16:10-12).

Little did I know when I worked to earn a new bike at age 11 that I was building vital traits to help me prepare for working and serving in God's future Kingdom for eternity to come. The same is true for you. So, let us profoundly appreciate God's great ultimate purpose for work and understand for whom we are really working. Work is definitely more than just a job.

Extract from Work: It's More Than Just a Job, an article from the Good News Magazine: January-February 2012 by John LaBissoniere

Did Jesus have brothers and sisters? (FAQ)

The Gospels reveal Christ's siblings who were born to Joseph and Mary.

In Matthew 13:55-56 some residents of Nazareth asked: "Is this not the carpenter's son? Is not His mother called Mary? And His brothers James, Joses, Simon, and Judas? And His sisters, are they not all with us?" This passage names four half brothers – Jacob, Joseph, Simeon and Judah in Hebrew – and mentions His half sisters (plural). Thus Jesus had at least six half siblings – four brothers and two sisters.

During Jesus' life, His half brothers did not believe in Him as Saviour and Messiah (John 7:5). Yet, after His resurrection, James became a prominent believer. In Acts 1:14 James, along with his other brothers and his mother Mary, is among the original members of the Church, the same group that received God's Spirit on the day of

Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4). James later became a leader of the Jerusalem congregation, playing a prominent role in the conference of Acts 15 (see verses 13-21). Paul visited James in Jerusalem (Acts 21:18). In Galatians 2:9 Paul refers to him as a "pillar" of the Church. James also wrote the New Testament epistle that bears his name (James 1:1). Another brother listed above, Judas or Judah (Matthew 13:55), wrote the short epistle of Jude (Jude 1:1).

The fact that these half brothers who grew up with Him under the same roof accepted Jesus as Messiah and personal Saviour is also strong testimony to fact that He lived an exemplary and sinless life. And the fact that they became believers after His resurrection is a powerful witness to the reality of that resurrection from the grave.

From Jesus Christ: The Real Story.



Q Luke 23:43 seems to indicate that the thief was in paradise with Jesus the same day he died, yet Christ was to be in the grave for three days and three nights (Matthew 12:40). This seems contradictory.

FAQ

A Most assume that the thief was “saved” when Jesus said to him: “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.” Two important principles of Bible study include reading a difficult-to-understand verse in its context and then also in the broader context of the entire Bible. The meaning of this verse must agree with the rest of the Bible. Christ said “the Scripture cannot be broken” (John 10:35).

The immediate context in which Christ made this statement was a reply to the thief’s plea, “Lord, remember me when You come into Your kingdom” (Luke 23:42). So “paradise” here equals the Kingdom of God.

A broader context of the entire Bible tells us that the Kingdom referred to is the rule of God’s government over the entire earth, with Christ as its King. Who will enter that Kingdom? The “sheep” of His flock, or Christians, will inherit the Kingdom at the return of Christ (Matthew 25:31-34; Daniel 7:27). “Flesh and blood” human beings cannot inherit that Kingdom, only those who are converted and remain faithful in their obedient service to God (1 Corinthians 15:51-53). That Kingdom has not yet come.

So what was Christ saying? The New King James Version reads, “Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” However, the Greek text of the Scriptures has no punctuation; translators added it to smooth out the text. In this instance, they misplaced the punctuation due to a lack of understanding of the truth of God’s Kingdom.

If we simply move the comma and put it after “today,” the meaning changes significantly – and agrees with the rest of the Bible: “Assuredly, I say to you today, you will be with me in Paradise.” Christ was promising the thief on

the day they were dying that he would (eventually, but not that same day) be with Christ in His Father’s Kingdom. Since Christ recognised the thief’s repentant attitude, He would have been able to say this.

It is also unreasonable to think that the thief was instantly converted. He may have been sorrowful for his mistakes, but he did not have the opportunity to seek baptism or receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (which comes through prayer and the laying on of hands by God’s ministry). Moreover, he had no opportunity to live a life of obedience to God – all aspects of the biblically revealed process of conversion. Contrary to ideas of “deathbed repentance,” conversion does not occur instantaneously.

Jesus Himself did not enter “paradise” that day. He was in the grave for the next three days and three nights. In Matthew 12:39-40, He gave this sign to confirm He was the Christ: “But He answered and said to them, ‘An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign, and no sign will be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.’” After His resurrection, Christ told Mary Magdalene, “Do not cling to Me, for I have not yet ascended to My Father; but go to My brethren and say to them, ‘I am ascending to My Father . . .’” (John 20:17). Later that day He allowed contact (Luke 24:39-40).

Our booklets *The Gospel of the Kingdom, What Happens After Death?* and *Transforming Your Life: The Process of Conversion* provide more information about these topics. If you do not have copies, we would be happy to send them to you. Or you can find them online at the literature library of our website at www.ucg.org/learn/bible-study-tools/bible-study-aids.

Let the Bible answer...

What does the Bible reveal about immortality?

God alone has immortality: 1 Timothy 6:15-16.

Immortality is a gift from God through Jesus Christ: Romans 6:23; John 6:44; 17:1-2. It is given to those who seek it in accordance with God’s will and have His Holy Spirit residing in them: Romans 2:5-9; 8:11.

Man is mortal and must “be clothed” with immortality by God: 1 Corinthians 15:53-54; 2 Corinthians 5:4.



Letters From Our Readers

Bible Course – guide for living

I thank you dearly for sending me the wonderful *Bible Study Course*. It is really helping me in my walk with God and bringing me closer to my Saviour Jesus Christ. Only Christ Jesus can help me overcome sin. I need His spiritual guidance through the Holy Spirit.

I struggle to cope with the state of the world today and I pray for peace and justice. I pray that I can truly repent and stay faithful to God's commandments.

Reader in the Wirral

Thank you for sending me all those lessons. Could you please send me lessons 1-3 again, as I have recently returned to the Lord. My faith has been renewed. I would really like to understand more. I will try to complete the course. Thank you for all you do to spread God's word.

Reader in Workington

Managing Your Finances

I'm a recovering addict and I've been clean from drugs for four years

and three months. I turned to Christianity three years ago and it changed my life completely. And I can now budget my money. It was so strange – it just happened. Praise the Lord.

Name and address supplied

I think people are quite judgemental about how others handle their money when they haven't encountered the range of issues others have faced.

Reader in Leighton Buzzard

The Ten Commandments

This booklet is very informative and predictions usually come true. Not long now until the end.

Reader in Southend-on-Sea

Your messages are beginner friendly. I am interested in [your booklet] *The Ten Commandments*.

Reader in Sunderland

Growth and encouragement

Thank you for *Beyond Today*. As a new Christian it is helping me grow.

Reader in Carrickfergus

Thank you for keeping me informed through *Beyond Today*. It is good to know our future is secure in God's hands.

Reader in Colwyn Bay

I have today received the November/December 2025 issue of *Beyond Today* magazine and I thank you for it.

On the attached letter it asks me to post to you confirmation that I wish my subscription to continue. To save me the postage costs and to avoid potential loss in the post, please could you accept this email as confirmation that, yes, I want you to continue my subscription indefinitely. I enjoy the magazine very much and find its articles encouraging and informative.

Reader in Shropshire

Our literature can be downloaded from our website at www.ucg.org or requested from the address at the bottom of the front page.

How you can help

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Jesus Christ instructed His disciples that as they had freely received they were to freely give (Matthew

10:8), so we supply our literature free of charge, making Christ's message available to all. Our gratitude goes to those who assist financially in this aspect of the Church's work.

Donations may be sent to *Beyond Today* or United Church of God, PO Box 705, Watford WD19 6FZ, United Kingdom; or online at www.ucg.org.uk/donate.html through PayPal. Donations can also be made directly to our bank account. Please contact us for details.

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