

A hand holding a glowing crystal ball against a fiery background. The crystal ball is highly reflective, showing bright highlights and dark shadows. The background is a warm, orange-red glow with some darker, smoky or flame-like patterns. The overall mood is mysterious and intense.

verticalthought
a magazine of understanding for tomorrow's leaders

October-December 2004

Is the Spirit World Real?

**Who's Getting
Tricked by
Halloween?**

***To See or Not to See:
That New Horror Film***

**How to Explain Your Beliefs
Without Losing Friends**

"You Don't Keep Christmas?" Experiences

Unmasking **the Spirit World**



Interest in the paranormal—that which is beyond the normal human realm—has exploded in recent years. These days our culture is filled with references to supernatural beings and supernormal powers. From horror movies dealing with exorcisms (casting evil spirits out of people), demonic possession (where evil spirits control people) or eerie mass murderers, to television programs about both good and bad spirits, to books and movies such as J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series that glorify certain aspects of the occult, to Gothic influences in music and dress—our culture is saturated with references to the spirit world.

What many don’t realize is that the spirit world has been around for a long time. Our ancestors first encountered the paranormal approximately 6,000 years ago in the Garden of Eden when the chief of evil spirits, Satan the devil, appeared as a serpent to deceive Eve (Genesis 3). Sadly, after doing his evil deed, the serpent didn’t crawl off in the grass and hibernate. Nor did Adam hunt him down and kill him. Satan is still alive today doing what he does best—deceiving “the whole world” (Revelation 12:9).

As you will see in this issue of *Vertical Thought*, the evil spirit world is out to destroy us! But we don’t have to be afraid because we can have help from our loving Creator who is *far* more powerful than all the evil spirits combined. Knowledge is power. And that’s what this issue is all about—giving you knowledge to understand what is going on in the spirit world undetected by human senses. Armed with this knowledge, it is our hope that you will make choices that will protect you and allow you to live a better life.

Our lead article for this issue, “Is the Spirit World Real?,” explains the basics that we all need to understand. Next comes “Who’s Getting Tricked by Halloween?” which gives the background to one of Satan’s favorite holidays. This is followed by “To See or Not to See: That New Horror Film”—a personal account by a young person who has faced peer pressure over this decision. To round out this issue’s main theme of the spirit world, “The Battle for Your Mind” explores five fronts on which young people are involved in mental warfare.

Knowing that it is challenging to explain our beliefs to others who don’t share our perspective, we next offer “How to Explain Your Beliefs Without Losing Friends.” Since so many of us move each year, some of you may be attending new schools and need to find new friends. “Without Friends” gives some practical advice about making new ones.

This is followed by “‘You Don’t Keep Christmas?’ Experiences”—personal stories of young people in the United Church of God explaining their convictions to classmates and friends. Of course you’ll find questions and answers throughout the issue as well as a health tip and our regular feature, “In the News,” which focuses on items of special interest to young people.

The Bible records a time when the king of Syria surrounded the prophet Elisha and his servant in the city of Dothan. The king was frustrated with Elisha because he, with God’s help, had been successfully advising the king of Israel on how to avoid capture by the king of Syria. Elisha’s servant awoke one morning, surprised and probably quite afraid when he saw Syrian troops surrounding the city.

In prayer, Elisha asked God to open his servant’s eyes “‘that he may see.’ Then the LORD opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw. And behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha” (2 Kings 6:17). Elisha’s servant miraculously saw the spirit world that was there to deliver them. We hope this issue of *Vertical Thought* will likewise open your eyes to the reality of the spirit world.

David Treybig
Managing editor



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Is the Spirit

Do you know for sure whether there really is an evil spirit named Satan? What about his minions called demons? How does all of this affect young people?

by Tom Clark

In Western cultures today there is a growing fascination with the occult and Satanism, despite the traditional Christian teaching that Satan represents the consummate evil.

Statistics show Satanism and Wicca to be among the fastest-growing religions in the United States today. Popular movies make it appear cool to be able to cast spells or call on powers that mere mortals do not possess. The Gothic culture calls to those who tend toward sadness or anger. The spirit world is clearly becoming more and more of a factor in our society.

As a Christian, what should our perspective be toward the spirit world? In the Bible, we see that Satan is not only very real and very powerful, but God clearly commands us not to get involved with him.

Teens today report that this is a big issue. Local high school students told me there are many openly Wiccan students at school, and that the number appears to be growing. There are also a number of students who are heavily involved in the Gothic culture and mentality, which for some includes a fascination with bondage and torture. One teen also mentioned how much easier it is to get caught up with the spirit world when drugs and alcohol are involved.

A popular genre of music is referred to as "Gothic/Dark-wave," which one Web site describes as "a musical journey of sadness and anger." There are also a growing number of movies focused on witchcraft, demonism and any number

of "enlightened" people today make statements like "I don't believe in a personal Satan. Satan to me is more of a metaphor, and a scapegoat to take the blame for the evil deeds of man." They believe Satan is simply a creation of the minds of men, a fantasy and nothing to take seriously. Satan is dismissed as a creation of "religion" to scare people into submission.

So what is the big deal? Isn't participating in Wicca or Gothic culture simply an expression of personal taste? Who are we to criticize personal choice? Aren't these movies about witchcraft and demonism just "fantasy"? Surely we are mature enough to tell the difference between fantasy and reality. Aren't Ouija boards and tarot cards just harmless party games? What is the problem with playing around with them?

As followers of Jesus Christ, what should our perspective be toward the spirit world? If we are willing to believe the Bible, we see that Satan is not only very real and very powerful, but God clearly commands us not to get involved with him or the occult (closely associated with Satan) in any way. Let's understand why.

Who are Satan and the demons?

The Bible reveals that Satan was originally created as "Lucifer," which means "light bringer." At some point he chose to rebel against his Creator (Isaiah 14:12-15). Ezekiel wrote of him, saying, "You were perfect in your ways from the day

World Real?

of "horror" themes. Books can be checked out of the public library on how to cast spells or how to be a witch.

The Internet is a ready source of "how-to" information on any of these subjects. Add to this tarot cards, Ouija boards, palm readers, psychic hotlines and an abundance of both drugs and alcohol, and we have a picture of a growing percentage of youth today experimenting with the spirit world.

At the same time a growing number of people deny

you were created, till iniquity was found in you" (Ezekiel 28:15). There was no sin, no evil, no disharmony in all God had created. This changed with the rebellion of Lucifer.

When this very first sin took place, Lucifer, whose name was then changed to Satan (which means "adversary"), apparently convinced a number of the angels to rebel with him against God. Together they fought God and lost. Satan and the rebelling angels, now known as demons, have been restrained here on earth since that time (Job 1:7; Revela-

tion 12:3-4). Instead of being the “light bringer,” Satan came to be known as a ruler of darkness (Ephesians 6:12).

Even though they were defeated by God, the demons have not given up their goal of trying to destroy whatever God creates. They have worked feverishly since the creation of man to destroy mankind, as we can see by the example of Adam and Eve (Genesis 3:1-6).

Neither Satan nor the other demons can forcibly take control of a human being against his or her will, as some people fear. But that does not mean that Satan and the demons are powerless among men. We must be sure we understand what power they do have and, as Paul wrote, make sure we do not allow them to take advantage of us (2 Corinthians 2:11).

Avoid contact with evil spirits

We can, whether we mean to or not, invite demonic influence into our minds. When Israel came into the Promised Land, God warned them not to allow anyone to practice witchcraft, cast spells or try to talk with the dead (Deuteronomy 18:9-14). The reason for this prohibition is that by involving ourselves in these practices, we open up our minds to the direct influence of the demon world. It is as if we opened the door of our minds and invited an evil spirit to come on in!

Put in terms of today’s practices, this would include tarot cards, Ouija boards, palm reading, horoscopes

and psychics. It would also include filling our minds with music, books and movies of the occult. There is an added danger if we also give up control of our minds through the abuse of alcohol and drugs. Our minds are precious instruments, and God expects us to carefully monitor what we allow to come in.

But the idea of having or being given a special “power” is an incredibly appealing idea to our pride and vanity. Satan knows this and uses it to his advantage.

In Matthew 4 we read that he even tried to get Jesus Christ to fall for his perverted reasoning. After showing Him all the kingdoms of the earth and their wealth and power, Satan said, “All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me” (Matthew 4:9). But Jesus understood the price of such a decision—worship of Satan meant losing His position as Savior and member of the God family. What will be the cost for us if we fall for the lie and worship Satan?

How Satan deceives us

Some of what we have talked about may seem quite extreme. What if you aren’t involved with any of these practices?



Neither Satan nor the demons can forcibly take control of a human being against his or her will, as some people fear. But that does not mean that Satan and the demons are powerless among men.

What if you don’t worship Satan? If you don’t go to horror movies, use Ouija boards or read bad books—then you are safe, right? Perhaps the most powerful way in which Satan influences human beings is through his power to broadcast attitudes. He is described as the “prince of the power of the air” (Ephesians 2:2). This seems to be a reference to his ability to transmit attitudes and tempting thoughts, and from this no one is immune.

Have you ever found yourself thinking an evil thought and wondered where it came from? Have you heard the comment “The devil made me do it”? The devil cannot *make* you do anything. But he can make something sound or feel so appealing that you are willing to choose to do it “on your own.” Maybe the quote should be, “The devil tempted me to do it, and I gave in.”

In Ephesians 6:12 (NIV) we are told: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”

We struggle with ourselves, with the unrighteous influences of our society and with the powerful attitudes and tempta-

tions presented to us by Satan and his demons. Temptation worked effectively against Adam and Eve, and it can work just as effectively against you and me!

How to resist satanic influence

What can we do to fight against Satan and his powerful evil influence? The apostle James gives very solid instruction: "Therefore submit to God. Resist the devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and He will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners; and purify your hearts, you double-minded" (James 4:7-8).

How do we cleanse our hands and purify our hearts? We make sure that our relationship with God is right. No other relationship we will ever have will be as important.

We must come to know God through prayer and Bible study. We have to learn to think like He does. We must ask Him to help us build a strong relationship with Him. We must repent and ask Him to cleanse us of our sins and give us the strength to stop sinning (Psalm 51:10). As we develop this relationship with Him, we will be able to discern what is of God and what is of Satan. They are not the same.

Once we are able to distinguish between what is of God and what is of Satan, we need to eliminate what is of Satan. The verses above in James tell us to resist the devil. We

need to remove ourselves from situations where there are activities involving Satan and his demons.

This should include movies and TV shows that glorify witchcraft and the occult. It should also include music that is dark in nature or that makes you feel sad or depressed. It also means that we do not give in to the many temptations that we face every day to break God's laws. That is what it means to resist Satan and draw closer to God!

Even though we cannot see it, the spirit world is very real. It has become quite popular with many people, young and old alike, to become involved with it through Wicca or various Gothic practices. Music, movies, books and magazines make these practices seem all the more appealing. But you do not have to join them. If you have been involved, you can remove yourself from it by the help of Almighty God.

When Paul recounted his conversion, he said that Christ sent him "to open their eyes, in order to turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins" (Acts 26:18). As God worked through Paul to bring people to the light, so He will do for you if you choose to obey Him.

Tom Clark is a husband, father and pastor of United Church of God congregations in Wichita and Salina, Kansas.



Q. If it is OK to read some fantasy novels and watch some movies, would it be OK to read novels involving the dead, vampires and werewolves?

A. This question involves making judgments and decisions about what is appropriate for a Christian to read. We all face this question regarding many facets of life, including the kind of music we listen to, the movies we watch and even the places we choose to go.

Everyone has to make his or her determination based on some fundamental principles. It would not be wise to simply say that since many people feel it is OK to read a certain fictional novel, then any fictional novel is acceptable. Everything has to be evaluated based on its own content and merit.

A person needs to ask what impact reading this book or see-

ing this movie is going to have. Some types of novels, movies, TV programs, etc., can be very emotionally upsetting and harmful to the mind. They can leave lasting, negative images and also begin to impact our sense of right and wrong.

We must be careful about what we allow into our minds. God does not expect us to avoid all forms of entertainment, but we are to consider if the experience has any redeeming value and what detrimental effects it may have on us, and then choose wisely.

To answer the question specifically, we recommend avoiding novels involving the dead, vampires and werewolves. These dark themes and fantasies are often rooted in satanic concepts and are not uplifting or educational. Because we might attend an occasional movie or read other fictional novels, it does not mean every type of reading material is healthy. Some who have delved heavily into this type of literature have ended up disturbed mentally.

If you have a question, e-mail us at info@verticalthought.org

There's a knock on your door one night. When you open the door, the darkness and a covering hide the person's face. All you hear is a voice calling out to give something or face the consequences.

Your mind quickly races to assess where you're vulnerable. Your car is in the driveway. The family dog is in the backyard. On the side of the house are the fruit trees and the little garden on which you've worked so hard. Spending hours cleaning egg off your house and car, picking broken glass out of your yard or removing toilet paper from your trees is not an enticing prospect.

You quickly decide it is better to simply pay. In modern language, that's called extortion. But on the evening of Oct. 31, it's called "trick or treat." Of course, many would explain that they're happy to give treats to the children, so what's the problem? Isn't it just a harmless night of fun when people get to put on costumes?

Come along with me as we briefly explore this topic of Halloween. Where did it come from? What's behind its practices, such as dressing up and going "trick-or-treating"? What about the decorations with the focus on witches, goblins, jack-o'-lanterns, tombstones, cobwebs and items of the occult? Where did this theme originate? If it's just a harmless night of fun, why are many churches now teaching *against* its observance?

First, we should note that Halloween has a huge economic impact. Estimates are that it earns around \$7 billion (U.S.) for retailers each year—\$2 billion for candy alone. Only Christmas surpasses it in financial impact. So there is a strong incentive for merchandisers to emphasize the event, vying for their "slice of the pie" of money spent on costumes, decorations, candy and other related items. Large Halloween-themed store displays begin well in advance of Oct. 31.

Celebrating Samhain— Lord of the Dead?

Compton's Reference Collection (1996) says the celebration of Halloween, or All Hallows Eve, precedes All Saints Day (a day set aside by the Catholic Church in the seventh century to honor all saints). But the celebration has its origins in autumn festivals of much earlier times.

The Druids (priests of the Celts) held a three-day festival at the beginning of November. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica-Micropaedia* (1981, article "Halloween") says this feast was the festival of Samhain, Lord of the Dead, and coincided with the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon new year. The souls of the dead were believed to visit their homes that night, and it was believed that witches and warlocks (male sorcerers) flew abroad playing

Who's Getting Tricked by Halloween?



Why do witches, goblins, jack-o'-lanterns, cobwebs, graveyards and symbols of the occult surround this holiday? You need to know the real story.

by Ken Treybig

tricks on people and wreaking havoc, so bonfires were kindled to frighten them away.

Since the Celts came through Asia Minor in their migration from the area of the Middle East to the British Isles, they were exposed to the Roman festival dedicated to Pomona, the Roman goddess of fruits. This festival took place around the same time of year. Nuts and apples, part of the winter food supply, were used to honor Pomona. The Celts then added this custom to their celebration of Samhain.

This night was considered the *best* for divinations concerning marriage, luck, health and death. It was the only day on which the help of the devil was openly invoked for such practices. Young people played games, such as bobbing for apples, to supposedly ascertain which ones would marry in the coming year.

Small stones were placed in the dying embers of the bonfires to represent the people present. If any were displaced the next morning, it was considered certain that those the stones represented would die within the next 12 months. Bands of young people, disguised in grotesque masks, carved lanterns from turnips and carried them through villages.

The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* concludes that the celebrations of Halloween are purely Druidical, which is further proved by the fact that as recently as early in the 20th century the night was still referred to in parts of Ireland as

Oidhche Shamhna, "Vigil of Saman," a variation in spelling for Samhain, god of the dead.

As the Catholic Church began to encourage the festival, poor families began to beg for pastries in exchange for promises

how did satan "worm his way" into the so-called christian calendar by getting the eve of all witches and demons transformed into the eve of all saints day?

to pray for the donor's dead relatives. This gave way to the modern "trick or treat" practice.

Satan enters "Christianity"

So how did Satan "worm his way" into the so-called Christian calendar by getting the eve of all witches and demons transformed into the eve of All Saints Day? The short version is that the Roman Pantheon (a temple) was dedicated by Emperor Hadrian around A.D. 100 to the pagan goddess Cybele and other Roman deities. In time, it fell into the hands of the barbaric tribes from the north. In A.D. 607

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Q. When people say, "Have a merry Christmas," how should you respond? Also, when you rearrange *Santa* it spells *Satan*. Do you think the people who came up with the name *Santa* did this deliberately?

A. For those of us who do not celebrate Christmas, knowing how to respond to someone who might be sincerely wishing us well is difficult. Here are a few principles that are important to keep in mind:

- 1) Most people wishing us well about Christmas have no idea that Christmas is pagan in its origin, and are often unaware that we do not celebrate it.
- 2) There is usually not enough time to respond to that person by giving a short explanation of either the origin of


Christmas or the fact that you don't celebrate it for reasons of conscience.

3) To most, saying "Merry Christmas" or "Have a happy Christmas" becomes so commonplace, it is very similar to saying "Have a good day." Most people say it out of obligation or common courtesy.

4) To simply say "Thank you" to someone who has wished you such would not be wrong—given the circumstances. It thanks them for the sentiment, but is not responding "in kind" by implying you observe Christmas.

As for the similar spelling of the words *Santa* and *Satan*, this is purely a coincidence, as these words originate in different languages and are wholly unrelated. *Santa* is a Latin word meaning "saint" or "holy." *Satan*, on the other hand, is a Hebrew word which means "Adversary" or "Accuser."

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have you ever found yourself hanging out with friends who wanted to go see a horror film? how can you decide what to do?

It's Saturday night and the youth group in your congregation is trying to decide how to spend the evening. Will it be a few games of bowling or a trip to the local burger joint that's always open past midnight?

"Why don't we go see that movie that just opened?" suggests one of your good friends. "You know, the one with the awesome special effects and the creepy plot. I hear it's supposed to be the scariest movie of the year!" A few teens begin to nod in approval.

You stand in your circle of close friends, unsure of how to respond. Yes, the movie is supposed to be terrifying—so scary, in fact, that there have been warnings about it in local papers. You even overheard a young couple at church discussing the degrading quality of such popular horror films. Still, somehow the positive response from your peers makes it sound appealing. And if your Church friends suggest it, then it must be OK, right?

With each new movie release, Hol-

To See or Not to See:

THAT NEW HORROR FILM

by Leslie Schwartz

making a decision as simple as what movie to watch might seem trivial, but the main idea of this controversial debate is powerful. what we let into our brains determines what we will think about and dwell on, and shapes our thoughts and actions.

Hollywood's quest for more advanced special effects and gorier plots seems to escalate. Movie producers and screenwriters know no limit to the infinite "creative potential" they possess, pushing the envelope a little further with each new flick.

As a Christian audience, how can we be more aware of media influences and respond to less-than-godly ideas and storylines? Satan's power keeps growing in all areas of society, pervading film today in particular. Making a decision as simple as what movie to watch might seem trivial to some, but the main idea of this controversial debate is powerful—what we let into our minds determines what we will think about and dwell on, and shapes our thoughts and actions.

How can we dwell on the crude and horrific images Hollywood offers, when God wants us to meditate and focus on things that are true, noble, just, pure, lovely, virtuous and of good report (Philippians 4:8)?

if we want to reflect godly principles and standards, then we must be selective and careful when deciding what we watch, listen to and participate in.

Few movies produced today reflect any fragment of the beauty God has in store for those who love and follow Him, but thousands exist that constantly tear down His wondrous plan in favor of sinful, worldly views.

God calls Christians out of the permeating darkness around us to be lights to the world (Matthew 5:14). It's difficult, if not impossible, to be a shining example if we surround ourselves with dark plots, demonic themes and ungodly ideas. We need to "walk as children of light" (Ephesians 5:8) and make our body "full of light" (Luke 11:35-36), traveling on the path of righteousness guided by the godly decisions we make on a daily basis.

We get to choose

Since we have a choice, why choose to fill our minds with demonic images and ungodly themes? In Romans, Paul tells us to not be "conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (12:2).

Every time we buy into the system and compromise our core beliefs and values to see that "hot new movie," we kid ourselves into believing that "just a little can't hurt us." We may

justify our behavior, thinking we are strong and know what we believe, but Satan wins another victory over our hearts and minds with each small compromise.

Guarding our minds against the clever schemes that society continually presents to us—in the guise of a hyped-up Hollywood blockbuster—by arming ourselves with the truth and the knowledge of God will ultimately help us along our spiritual journey (Ephesians 6:11-13).

More than movies

However, the endless cycle of choices involved in standing up for what we believe doesn't exist solely in movies. We must also analyze the television shows we watch, the music we listen to, the role models we strive to emulate and, overall, the material we read and the things in which we invest our time.

Choices shape who we are and what we become. If we want to reflect godly principles and standards, then we must be selective and careful when deciding what we watch, listen to and participate in. We must constantly evaluate our lives and behavior so they reflect biblical standards and God's high calling, working to cultivate godly "fruits" that bring us closer to the ultimate goal of being part of God's Kingdom (Matthew 6:33; 7:17-20).

Like the teen mentioned above, I have been in situations where I had to decide whether I should stand up for God's truth or lie low in the background. Who wants to be the one to speak out against popular opinion, especially in your congregation's youth group or at school, risking your reputation to uphold certain standards? Nevertheless, won't God be pleased when we rise above the norm, no matter how popular the majority opinion may be? We need to take it upon ourselves to step back from tempting situations and evaluate them in order to come to an unbiased conclusion that honors and respects God's desires for our lives.

Ultimately, we should all be ready and willing to stand up, in a polite and humble way, for what we know is right and what is in our best interest based on godly standards. Not only will this attitude shed a fresh light on the situation, but in the end it can also help us gain respect from our peers. Politely and humbly standing up for a godly principle can lead to a blessing for setting a godly example that others can follow (Romans 8:28).

Leslie Schwartz is 20 years old and attends UCLA where she is studying mass communication, education and developmental psychology and working as a resident assistant. She attends the Los Angeles, California, congregation of the United Church of God and loves writing and going to good movies.

Consider the egg. A study of divine design in both variety and symmetry, it anticipates growth and change, and within the sturdy shell resides the very stuff of life. Sturdy, but not indestructible, it must be guarded carefully because the egg faces danger.

Now consider that your mind is like an egg—amazing, resilient, but not indestructible. A young mind anticipates growth and change because it is impressionable. Anyone who tells you that you don't need to guard your mind is either a fool or wants to sell you something.

In the last 20 years science has studied and mapped the human brain, but God long ago mapped the mind. That map is in the Bible, which provides instructions on the proper care and feeding of your mind, the heart of your existence.

Imagine this. The egg has foes that seek to break it, fry, scramble, boil and rot it. Your mind has adversaries also. Envision mental battles raging in and around your head. Each of your mind's enemies tries to control, deceive, corrupt and pollute it. Forewarned is forearmed.

Battle One: Your mind vs. the demonic spirit world

The popular, head-in-the-sand opinion today—even in some mainline Christian churches—claims that the devil is a myth. But this is not true. Think of this: Satan's greatest freedom to do evil occurs when no one believes he exists.

Satan and his demons were once holy angels. But they chose the way of evil, and now they want to get



There is a very real battle going on inside your head. You have the power to determine who will win. Don't lose this crucial confrontation!

by **Randy Stiver**

Here is what Proverbs 4:23-27 says: "Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life. Put away from you a deceitful mouth, and put perverse lips far from you. Let your eyes look straight ahead, and your eyelids look right before you. Ponder the path of your feet, and let all your ways be established. Do not turn to the right or the left; remove your foot from evil."

Keeping your heart, guarding your mind—against what and how?

into your head. But your young and beautiful mind is yours and God's, not theirs.

The devil transmits dark and depraved moods, attitudes and impulses. As "the prince of the power of the air," he is the spirit being working mental, emotional and spiritual corruption in people's minds to lead them into wrong thoughts and active disobedience (Ephesians 2:2). Beware and delete thoughts of selfish lust, rebellion, brooding anger, violent hatred and any other mind-set that violates God's perfect law of love.

Satan worship and witchcraft are seriously growing movements today. Fortunately, some churches have started raising objections by not celebrating the ancient, pagan holiday of Halloween—a day closely related to demons.

Demonic religion appears harmless because horror films with wizards and witches and vampire-slaying TV shows desensitize our minds to the actual danger. Avoid such entertainment, books, magazines, organizations and Web sites. Satan uses them to promote wider acceptance of evil.

Resistance is vital (James 4:7). Yield your mind to God and good. Be watchful. As mother Eve misperceived in the Garden of Eden, the devil is a subtle adversary.

Battle Two: Your mind vs. Hollywood

Do you think the motion picture and television industry is concerned about improving your mental and moral health? Do you think that constantly watching scenes of violence and sex has no negative effect on your mind? Think again.

The average American child has logged as many hours watching television by age 6 as he or she will spend in college classes to earn a bachelor's degree, and will spend about as much time in front of the screen as in class for the next 12 years.

Envision mental battles raging in and around your head. Each of your mind's enemies tries to control, deceive, corrupt and pollute it. Forewarned is forearmed.

TV and movies affect our minds. Numerous studies in America, Australia and elsewhere have established that media violence increases social violence (<http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/mlr/readings/articles/kalin.html> and http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/JCP/articles_mlir/degaetano/mediavilonce.html). Viewing illicit, electronic media sex and violent programming desensitizes our minds to the sanctity of life and the sanctity of monogamous, heterosexual marriage and family.

What we feed our minds becomes our thoughts just as surely as "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matthew 12:34). We must watch what we watch—meaning beware of negative, electronic peer pressure. Pick films and programs of redeeming value. Reject the glorification of sin, explicit sex and violence.

Battle Three: Your mind vs. the Internet

Never in the history of man has so much pornography been displayed before so many. The Internet as a tool of research can also be the digital line to destruction. To view Internet or printed porn is to commit adultery in the mind. Then the pornography controls the mind, jades the emotions and erodes the moral fiber.

Violent or sexually explicit video games are not healthy for young adult minds seeking the truth—or for any others either. The lure of such gaming is its mentally engaging interactivity and the emotional, adrenal rush caused by the graphic violence. Once again, intense emotional desensitizing takes place, weakening the moral mind.

Use the Internet wisely. Don't let it addict you. Stay away from pornography—anywhere! Play video games sparingly and choose only those that are not morally corrupting.

Battle Four: Your mind vs. university

You mean to tell me that school is messing with my head, too? Unfortunately, yes, even down into the primary grades.

Universities have traditionally been the think tanks of society. This could be a good thing—if the professors were guided by values drawn from the Ten Commandments and

a belief in God. Regrettably, this has rarely been the case even when your parents went to college.

Today in most state and private universities, the Bible and those who even claim to believe it are singled out for intellectual and social ridicule. The predominant philosophy of evolutionary, secular humanism is, in essence, modern education's religion. The professors of that mind-set are the wise men, and unquestioning students are the followers.

Your mission is to walk those halls of academia for about four years, assimilate specific, useful knowledge and exit with your faith, that is, your mind, intact. Be thoughtful—"keep your heart with all diligence." The in-your-face bumper sticker says, "Question Authority." So question theirs.

There is strength in numbers. Find others of like mind

Continued on page 19

How to Explain Your Beliefs Without Losing Friends!

“You don’t keep Christmas?” “You’re going where for eight days?” “You’re not going to heaven when you die?” “Why can’t you play ball on Saturday?”

by Erik Jones



If you are part of the Church of God, you’ve probably already heard these questions many times. They simply reflect others’ astonishment at the beliefs we hold. As most of us realize, our beliefs aren’t very popular. Frankly, these beliefs make us *quite* different!

Many people who claim to be Christian don’t believe in absolute truth. They assume that there are “many roads” to salvation (heaven, as they would say) and that one shouldn’t proclaim any particular way as the *only* way. On the opposite extreme are the nonreligious—atheists and agnostics who

Know what you believe and why

Simply put, how can you defend what you do if you don’t know why you do it? Many teens in the Church of God over the years have faithfully kept the Sabbath and Holy Days, tithed on their allowance or paycheck and kept away from worldly holidays—but did not understand why they did the things they did. They just did it because that’s what their parents said to do.

So how do you gain a good understanding of your beliefs? One obvious answer is by reading your Bible. Though it is true that teens often have very busy schedules, it is wise to set aside time each day to read the Bible. The Bible is the source for all doctrine in the Church of God (2 Timothy 3:16) and is the best place to start to get an understanding of what God wants us to do.

It is also very helpful to read the literature published by the Church (as you are doing now). Specifically study the fundamental doctrines of the Church. The *Fundamental Beliefs* booklet is an excellent source for basic explanations of our key doctrines. Since Holy Days, holidays and the Sabbath are such distinct beliefs, it is likely that we all will have to defend these sometime in our lives. In preparation for doing so, it is wise to memorize key verses pertaining to these beliefs.

For example, to explain the Holy Days, it is good to know that Leviticus 23 and Deuteronomy 16 contain commands for “the feasts of the LORD” and Zechariah 14 shows that they will be kept in the Millennium when Jesus Christ returns to establish God’s Kingdom.

For the Sabbath, it is good to know that Exodus 20 contains

Eventually, it seems, all of us have to explain our beliefs. How can we best do so without losing our friends? Should we debate the truth? What approach should we take? This article will attempt to answer these questions.

have no religion and think of religious people as ignorant. We often come into contact with all of these types of people when we are at school or out with our friends.

When people hear that we hold strong moral convictions (and even call it “truth”), we can suddenly become the odd ones out. People will then want to know *why* we believe what we do.

Eventually, it seems, all of us have to explain our beliefs. How can we best do so without losing our friends? Should we debate the truth? What approach should we take? This article will attempt to answer these questions.

the Fourth Commandment and that Mark 2:27-28 shows that the Sabbath was made for humanity by Jesus Christ. This is just the bare minimum. It would be much better for us to know where to find many more of the vital scriptures on key issues.

Of course, the Church does not want you to blindly follow its teachings. Before we can explain the truth with all our hearts, we must examine everything carefully then “hold fast what is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21). Once we have proven the truth to be *truth*, it is our duty to hold on to it, never let it go and pass it on to others who are interested.

When you are put on the spot

So you’re at school and it finally comes up—your beliefs. A teacher asks you, “Why are you leaving my class for a week?” A student asks you, “Why aren’t you coming to the Christmas party?” A coach asks you, “Why can’t you

practice or play on Friday night?” What do you do? Do you avoid the subject and immediately get out of the situation?

We must not be ashamed of what we believe. Christ gives this strong warning: “Whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will be ashamed when He comes in His own glory.”

Do you go into a sermon on why they are sinning by not doing what you’re doing?

We first need to understand that we must not be ashamed of what we believe. Christ gives this strong warning: “Whoever is ashamed of Me and My words, of him the Son of Man will



Q&A

Q. Is it wrong to keep holidays such as Christmas and Easter since the Bible says nothing about them? And what about the Holy Days God gave to the Israelites? Do we need to keep them? What’s the difference?

A. There are huge differences between Christmas and Easter and the Holy Days God commanded His people to observe. Christmas and Easter are man-made festivals without biblical authorization. God’s festivals mentioned in Leviticus 23 are biblically sanctioned and were commanded forever. God’s Holy Days teach us how to live godly lives and give us hope by explaining His plan of salvation. Christmas and Easter customs and celebrations mask these important truths.

As an example, the Days of Unleavened Bread, commanded by God (Leviticus 23:6) and observed by the early Christians (1 Corinthians 5:6-8), teach us to put sin (represented during this weeklong festival by leavened items such as bread and cake) out of our lives. This festival teaches us that we must struggle to overcome sin with the help of God’s Spirit and live righteously. Easter celebrations ignore this important instruction.

The contrast between the biblically authorized Feast of Tabernacles and Christmas is similar. The former inspires us with hope in Christ’s future 1,000-year reign on earth in the Kingdom of God, while the latter celebrates His birth with traditions, ornaments and customs He would not approve, on a day He could not have been

born. (The Bible shows His birth was nowhere near Dec. 25.) Easter and Christmas not only lack biblical authorization, but they entered traditional Christianity through men who deliberately replaced God’s commanded festivals with their own. Trying to justify the change, both of these pagan (pre-Christian) festivals were dressed up with supposed Christian meanings—one to celebrate Christ’s resurrection, the other His birth.

As wonderful as Christ’s birth and resurrection are, the Bible does not tell us to celebrate these things (and especially not with the pagan customs associated with them). Instead, it tells us to annually commemorate His death (Luke 22:19; 1 Corinthians 11:24-25) and to seek the Kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33). God commands us to observe His Holy Days (Leviticus 23), which help us do these things. Using rabbits and Easter eggs to remember Christ’s resurrection or decorating evergreen trees to remember His birth comes not from the Bible, but from ancient paganism.

Given the history and meanings of Easter and Christmas, it is quite understandable why so many people today think of Christianity as *only* a celebration of what Christ has done for us instead of the honorable quest to live godly lives in anticipation of His return to establish the Kingdom of God.

If you want more of the facts about Christmas and Easter, request our free booklet *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Keep?* Additional information about God’s annual Holy Days is presented in our free booklet *God’s Holy Day Plan: The Promise of Hope for All Mankind*. You will find both of these booklets at www.ucg.org/booklets/.

If you have a question, e-mail us at info@verticalthought.org

be ashamed when He comes in His own glory” (Luke 9:26). It is easy not to be ashamed of Christ at Church, but when we get out in the world, all of us are tempted to try to hide our beliefs so we don’t look different.

The apostle Peter instructs us: “Always be ready to give a defense [explanation] to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you” (1 Peter 3:15). We are not just to give a defense for the truth, but be ready to provide an answer! That’s why we need to “be diligent [study, KJV] to present yourself approved to God” (2 Timothy 2:15).

Occasionally, we may lose a friend because of our beliefs. When this happens, we can be encouraged by the words of Scripture: “For to you it has been granted

on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake” (Philippians 1:29).

Remember, God does not want us to lose friends. If we remember to be kind and honest in our explanations, we may be able to maintain our relationships. But regardless of the outcome, we can always take comfort in God’s promise to remain faithful to those who respect and obey Him. As Hebrews 13:5 explains, He will “never leave you nor forsake you.”

Erik Jones is now 21 years old and is a student at the University of Akron. He attends the United Church of God congregation in Akron, Ohio.

Four keys to use when explaining your beliefs



Let’s use the Sabbath as an example. You are on your school baseball team and you have been able to dodge games on the Sabbath the whole season. Suddenly, your team wins in the playoffs and is thrust into the championship game, which happens to fall on Saturday. This is the biggest game you will ever have a chance to play in!

But you know that God’s Sabbath is holy and that you just can’t do it. You e-mail your coach and tell him you won’t be able to make it. The next day at school your coach corners you and asks why you can’t play. He says that he really needs your bat in the lineup, and demands an explanation. What do you do?

Be honest. Don’t try to hide your reason. You could tell him that it is your personal belief (not just your parents’) that the seventh-day Sabbath is holy. Be brief! You don’t need to go into a sermon, just use a short, straightforward explanation. In many cases, you won’t even need to quote scriptures. If the

coach continues to ask questions, then you can get more specific and possibly bring up specific scriptures.

Don’t argue Scripture. Your job is not to get into a theological debate. You are merely providing a person with an answer to a question you were asked. That answer should be given in complete humility! Others may not agree with you, but they will respect you for your attitude!

Notice the instruction of the apostle Paul: “Have nothing to do with stupid and senseless controversies; you know that they breed quarrels. And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone, an apt teacher, patient, correcting opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant that they will repent and come to know the truth” (2 Timothy 2:23-25, New Revised Standard Version).

Challenge them. If the person seems to be very interested in what you have to say, challenge him or her to study it personally! If the conversation is about a worldly holiday, you can encourage the person to look up the origins in an encyclopedia. Most of the time, he or she will walk away and you will never hear about the subject again.

Don’t ever try to convert someone. Especially when dealing with relatives or close friends, you may have the temptation to try to persuade another into believing the truth. This is almost always a mistake! The Bible teaches that a person must receive a specific calling from God to become a true Christian (John 6:44-45)—not be persuaded by good arguments!

We can’t force the truth on anyone. We can gently explain it when asked, but we should never do so in a judgmental way. If you find someone has a serious interest in the truth, it would be wise to direct him or her to the Bible and UCG literature.

We can’t force the truth on anyone. We can gently explain it when asked, but we should never do so in a judgmental way. If you find someone has a serious interest in the truth, it would be wise to direct him or her to the Bible and Church literature.



Q. ■ Which scriptures explain when Jesus Christ was born?

A. ■ While the Bible never gives an exact date (day, month and year), there are some general indicators of both the year and season of the year. Obviously the exact date of Christ's birth is not needed for salvation, because the apostle Paul specifically told Timothy he had what was needed for salvation—the Scriptures he had learned since his youth (the Old Testament) with the added understanding of faith in Jesus Christ as the Savior (2 Timothy 3:15). Let's look at the general information, though, that is given.

First, let's start with the season of the year. Luke 2 describes the circumstances of Christ's birth. Verse 8 says there were shepherds living out in the fields with their sheep at that time. Various sources will point out that shepherds around Jerusalem would not stay in the fields past the autumn. They would bring the sheep in for the winter.

For example, according to *Celebrations: The Complete Book of American Holidays*, Luke's account "suggests that Jesus may have been born in summer or early fall. Since December is cold and rainy in Judea, it is likely the shepherds would have sought shelter for their flocks at night" (p. 309). Similarly, *The Interpreter's One-Volume Commentary* says this passage argues "against the birth [of Christ] occurring on Dec. 25 since the weather would not have permitted" shepherds watching over their flocks in the fields at night.

Also, Jesus' parents came to Bethlehem to register in a Roman census (Luke 2:1-4). The Romans would have known better than to have taken such a census in the dead of winter, when temperatures often dropped below freezing and roads were in poor condition for traveling. Taking a census under such conditions would have been self-defeating.

So from that passage of Scripture we can at least know one season when He was *not* born—the winter.

So was He born in spring, summer or autumn? A prophecy in the book of Daniel is helpful here. The last part of chapter 9 gives a prophecy about His coming and verse 27 mentions a "week" of His confirming the covenant, but that in the middle of the week He would bring an end to sacrifice and offerings. The book of Hebrews explains how His sacrifice ended the need for the Old Testament sacrificial system (chapters 8, 9 and 10).

A "week" in prophecy can stand for seven years, a day for a year (Numbers 14:34). We therefore conclude that His ministry lasted 3½ years, with the other 3½ years to be completed at some other time. We know Jesus Christ was killed at Passover time and that His ministry started when He was around the age of 30 (Luke 3:23). Putting all of this together makes it most probable that He was born six months before Passover—or sometime in the fall.

An autumn birth is also substantiated, and in fact more positively proven, by the timing of the birth of John the Baptist. Luke 1 tells that story.

John the Baptist's father, Zacharias, was a priest of the order of Abijah. In King David's time the priests had been organized to serve at various times—a week at a time from Sabbath to Sabbath starting with the first week in the month Nisan. They would all serve together during the feast seasons. Abijah was the eighth course (1 Chronicles 24:10).

It is a matter of doing the math to realize he was serving around early June, so when he was able to go home to his wife, Elizabeth, so she could conceive, it would have been around mid-June. That means John the Baptist was born nine months later, probably in late March.

Then in Luke 1:26 we're told the angel appeared to Mary telling her she would conceive her Son in Elizabeth's sixth month. So Jesus Christ was six months younger than John the Baptist—meaning He probably would have been born in late September when Jerusalem was crowded with people coming to observe the autumn feasts. This would explain why there was no room for Joseph and Mary at the normal hotels or "inns" near Jerusalem (Luke 2:7).

Now for the year. This has been the subject of some controversy, but again we seem to be able to find some clues. Luke 2:1-2 tells us Jesus Christ was born during Caesar Augustus' reign at the time of the first census when Quirinius was governor. Matthew 2 also tells us that Herod (the Great) was still king immediately after Christ's birth. Since Herod died somewhere around 4 or 3 B.C., and some records indicate Quirinius was ruling in 4 B.C., we believe Christ was probably born in late September of 4 B.C.

Although it's difficult to determine the first time anyone celebrated Dec. 25 as Christmas, historians are in general agreement that it wasn't until sometime during the fourth century. This is an amazingly late date. Christmas was not observed in Rome, the capital of the Roman Empire, until about 300 years after Christ's death. Its origins show that it cannot be traced back to the earliest Christians.

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Without Friends...



Walking into a new school in the middle of my seventh grade year, I felt waves of excitement, fear and trepidation. No familiar faces—a whole new set of classes, teachers and students to meet. New friends to make? I hoped so, but on a day like this, that seemed too much to hope.

I'd had these feelings before, like coming into my fourth elementary school in the middle of my second grade year. The students were all reciting something I'd never heard: "I before E, except after C." I felt like an alien, very lost and out of place.

It's happened to just about everyone at one time or another. Being a stranger in a new place, knowing no one, with no friends in sight. Or having your best friend move away, or worse, *turn* away and no longer be your friend.

Friends can give life both its zest and its stability. They can make the good times far better and the bad times much easier. But what can you do when life throws you a curve and takes you away from your friends? What if good friends are really hard to find?

Mother Teresa, a hero of the poor, sick and downtrodden of the world, was no stranger to disease and suffering. But when she was asked "What is the worst disease you have seen?" she replied: "Of all the diseases I have known, loneliness is the worst."

We all have times of loneliness—it can even happen in a crowd. But the God who made us doesn't want us to be lonely. He wants us to have strong, meaningful relationships—with our families, with friends, with His Church and with Him.

Mike Bennett is a husband, father, managing editor of *United News*, and copy editor for *Vertical Thought* living near Cincinnati, Ohio.

What can we do to gain more friends? Here are a few ideas gleaned from many wise people, young and old, and from observing many friendly people. Let's start with a very simple one that can have surprising results:

- **Smile!** Remember a time when a simple smile meant a lot to you? Give some of that power away. Try a scientific experiment (or trust those who have): People often smile back when others smile at them. You have to make this first move in breaking the ice. It's a subconscious clue that you are friendly.
- **Say something encouraging.** "I hope you do well in the game [or in the concert or on the math test]." Too often people hear put-downs—but a sincere compliment or friendly word of encouragement can be a welcome breath of fresh air.
- **Show your interest.** Ask about their hobbies, sports or other interests.
- **Listen.** So many of us hunger for others to listen to us. We can provide that invaluable service—free! Communication experts talk about the importance of eye contact and body language as cues that we are really listening. Don't let your eyes wander or you'll send the wrong message. (You don't have to stare the person down, though. Just let your eyes show you are interested.)

Getting Tricked

Continued from page 9

it was recaptured by Rome and given to Pope Boniface IV. In A.D. 610 it was rededicated, this time to Mary and all the saints, and people were encouraged to pray for all saints on May 13 each year.

Since the time of Constantine, the Roman Empire had usually allowed only one religion (Christianity) in an effort to unify all its conquered peoples. So when Charlemagne invaded and conquered parts of Eastern Germany, he required their king, Wittekind, to be baptized and accept Christianity. The Germans continued to insist on their old religious practices, though, so in A.D. 834 Pope Gregory IV felt he could solve the problem by changing the date of observing All Saints Day to Nov. 1 throughout the empire. So the empire tried to transform this evil night by giving it another

name and calling it good.

Notice what the apostle John had to say about God and darkness: "This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). Throughout the New Testament there is a recurring theme of Satan being the god of darkness, in contrast to God and Jesus Christ who are of "the light."

Yet Satan constantly presents himself as good. In 2 Corinthians 11:14-15 Paul wrote that "Satan himself transforms himself into an angel of light. Therefore it is no great thing if his ministers also transform themselves into ministers of righteousness." Those are powerful words warning about attempts to "transform" something from a pagan background into something good.

So the seemingly innocuous practice of trick-or-treating has much more sinister

ramifications than its similarity to extortion. The combination of Bible verses condemning Satan's secretive influence, the ready availability of historical information about the background of Halloween with its focus on evil spirits, and with the awareness that Wicca and Satanism are among the fastest-growing religions in the United States today, have led many churches to begin teaching against the observance of this "eve of the dead." They now recognize it for what it is—another attempt by Satan to get into the lives of people.

Don't allow him into your life. Follow the instruction of Ephesians 5:11, which tells Christians to have nothing to do with the evil works of darkness.

Ken Treybig is the director of United Youth Camp Carter and pastor of United Church of God congregations in East Texas and Texarkana, Texas.



We all face times when a friend is hard to find. What can we do to remedy this difficult situation?

by Mike Bennett

• **Develop a hobby; join a club or team.** Friendships grow most naturally in the soil of shared interests.

• **Study friendly people.** Consider the things the “friend magnets” you know do, and see how to adapt them to your personality. A high school senior I know, who always seems to be able to meet new people, is bold and outspoken and cheerful. Maybe your personality won’t stretch enough right now to be bold and outspoken, but the cheerfulness part might work.

• **Be willing to accept personality and other differences in your friends.** We all have a personality type, but we can shape it and stretch it more than most people ever try. Friendliness is a trait everyone can have.

• **Focus on what you can give a friend.** Too often friendship problems come when we focus on what we are not getting.

• **If you’re new in town, meet some of the other new kids.** At least you start with one thing in common! Plus they too could use a friend.

• **Expand your circle beyond just the “usual suspects.”** Some of those who become our best friends might not seem likely candidates at first. Often a good place to look for a friend is in someone who could use a friend. The most popular person may not have time for

another best friend. Consider the handicapped, the elderly.

One teenager wrote about an extraordinary friendship. “Seven days ago I lost a friend. He wasn’t a usual friend, but was a very special friend. He was a 71-year-old man who attended my local congregation . . . Anyone who knew him will tell you he was one of the most pleasant people you could ever meet. He had a rough life. He battled many health problems that ultimately resulted in his losing both his legs.

“Whenever you saw him, you saw his smile. He always had a smile and an encouraging word. I thank God for letting me get to know him in the last years of his life. He was like the grandfather I never had, and he was the kind of man I hope I can be.”

• **Study stories of good friends.** One that moved me is the story of Damon and Pythias, loyal friends who were willing to give their lives for each other (William Bennett, *The Book of Virtues*, 1993, pp. 306-308). The Bible is full of real and inspiring stories that can help us improve our friendships. Read about David and Jonathan, Ruth and Naomi, Jesus and Mary and Martha, Jesus and Peter, Jesus and John and many more.

• **Remember, it’s not worth it to go against your morals and beliefs to try to be accepted.** The Bible gives many examples of false friends (consider Delilah and Judas) and even talks about some friends to avoid (Deuteronomy 13:6; Proverbs 22:24; James 4:4). God will provide another way—ask Him.

This short article only scratches the surface of this important subject, but we’d love to hear your tips and your stories about friendship for a future issue. Also, you may want to explore the biblical principles of right relationships in more detail. Our free booklet *Making Life Work* can help you in this.

Battle

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to yours and encourage each other in clear thinking. Find good, sound-minded mentors to provide you with truth and reality checks.

Battle Five: Your mind vs. yourself

In a paraphrase of the Scottish poet Robert Burns: “O would some Power the gift to give us, / to see ourselves as others see us! / It would from many a blunder free us, / and foolish notion . . .” (“To a Louse,” www.robertburns.org/works/97.html).

The human mind with human nature proves self-focused and deceptive. “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked; who can know it?” (Jeremiah 17:9).

Imagine that—your own mind plays selfish tricks on you! So

the hardest person to be honest with is yourself. The popular philosophy of today’s schools is to teach students to develop self-esteem, to learn to love themselves. God’s got news for us: We already love ourselves! The challenge is to learn to love God with all our heart, soul and mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves (Matthew 22:36-40).

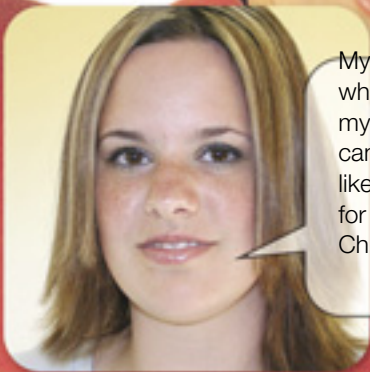
Let’s give the devil his due. The unseen ruler of this world manipulates our innate selfishness, twisting our own minds around to think, say and do evil. This is what your mind is up against. How can you stop him and win those mental battles?

The prescription is the basis of a true Christian life. Pray daily. Read the Bible regularly. Do what is right. Think about God, others and the truly good things of life.

“Finally,” as Philippians 4:8 tells us, “whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy—meditate on these things.”

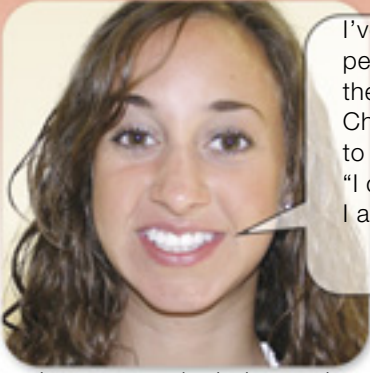
Randy Stiver is the pastor of United Church of God congregations in Coos Bay, Eugene and Roseburg, Oregon.

"You Don't Keep Christmas?" Experiences



My sophomore year I had a class with all freshmen. I hadn't met any of them before and when some of them found out I didn't celebrate Christmas, several wanted to talk about my belief. One girl asked me if I even believed in God. When I said "Yes," she said, "How can you believe in God and not celebrate Christmas?" Continuing, she asked "Don't you like to get presents?" I told her and the others that if they really celebrated that holiday for God, then they wouldn't care about the presents. Several then admitted to me that Christmas was now just about getting presents. – **Kara**

I was in ninth grade in biology class and it was getting near Christmas. Someone (I believe it was the girl sitting across from me) asked me what I was getting other people for Christmas. Instead of discreetly handling the situation, I opted to launch into a proof of the pagan origin of Christmas and of Christ's real birthday. She couldn't believe I didn't keep Christmas and suggested that I didn't believe in the real Jesus. I tried to prove to her that Christ's birthday was in the fall, but her eyes quickly glazed over and I got nowhere. So much for my ability to convert others! – **Josh**



I've had many different responses when I tell people that I don't keep Christmas, but one of the most amazing was "Well, if you don't keep Christmas, you are Jewish!" Even after trying to explain that I wasn't Jewish, the person said, "I don't care. You're still Jewish." To this person I am still the "Jewish girl." – **Becky**



I was once asked why my church didn't choose another day to celebrate Christ's birthday since we don't believe it occurred on Dec. 25. I responded that we don't need to celebrate the day He was born but rather what He did when He lived here on earth. The day He was born doesn't give me salvation; following the instructions He gave us when He lived does. – **Ashley**

When I get asked why I don't celebrate Christmas, I ask the person, "Why do you?" After hearing their response, I explain that all we generally know is what we have been told by our parents and ministers but that I have personally researched this and proven to myself that I shouldn't celebrate Christmas. I then ask them if they have really studied the subject. The usual responses are "No" or they don't say anything. – **Josh**



If you'd like to know more about why these young people don't observe Christmas, read our free booklet *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Keep?*, available at www.ucg.org/booklets.



Q&A

Q. Are New Year celebrations pagan in origin?

A. Simply put, the answer is yes! In the earliest days of the Church (first and second centuries after Christ) there were no such celebrations as Christmas and New Year's. *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* states: "According to the hypothesis accepted by most scholars today, the birth of Christ was assigned the date of the WINTER SOLSTICE (December 25th on the Roman Calendar . . . January 6th on the Egyptian Calendar) because on this day, as the sun began its return to the northern skies, the pagan devotees of MITHRA celebrated 'dies natalis Solis Invicti' (the birthday of the invincible sun)."

Those customs carried over in the observance of Christmas (with its many traditions and practices steeped in paganism and mythology), and the "birth" of the "new year" of the sun! This is why the Roman calendar designates Jan. 1 as the

beginning of the "new year" as opposed to God's holy calendar (the Hebrew calendar). The beginning of the year from God's perspective is in the spring.

Much of the symbolism associated with New Year's today (mistletoe among others) has very definite sexual origins and meanings.

Because we live in this secular society and must operate within the Roman calendar, even as Christians we acknowledge that a new calendar year begins to be counted on Jan. 1. Yet to get involved in the celebration of such would not be appropriate. That said, one should be careful not to become too judgmental if a Christian is, for example, viewing a football game or parade at that time of year—as opposed to actually "celebrating" the "new year."

There are many resources that show the pagan origins of New Year's celebrations. You can find related material in reference encyclopedias and online research resources as well.

If you have a question, e-mail us at info@verticalthought.org



Q&A

Q. What about Thanksgiving, Hanukkah and Purim?

A. Since the Jews added the feasts of Purim (the origins of which are described in the book of Esther) and Hanukkah, otherwise known as the Feast of Lights or Feast of Dedication (John 10:22-23), some believe we are free to add any religious holidays and celebrations of our own choosing. Is this true?

Important differences in the background and intent of these observances are obvious when we compare them to Christmas, Easter and Halloween. Purim commemorates the defeat of the Jews' enemies during the time of Queen Esther, and Hanukkah celebrates the rededication of the

Jerusalem temple after its defilement by the Syrian king Antiochus Epiphanes. Neither incorporates pagan customs. Hanukkah, like the American holiday of Thanksgiving, is a celebration of thanks and honor to God for His blessings.

An important distinction between these holidays and those rooted in paganism is the realization that these celebrations can be kept in addition to God's commanded feast days. Unlike Christmas and Easter, they do not alter, replace or distort the meaning of a festival of God or other biblical truths. These particular days are in harmony with the apostle Paul's admonition for "giving thanks always for all things to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Ephesians 5:20) (Source: *Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Keep?*, p. 23).

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IN THE NEWS

Compiled by James Capo

Trashing the Truth: New Bible Translation Promotes Sin

Translation is tricky business. Sometimes it's hard to exactly translate a point from one language to another. Sometimes meanings of words change over time, or the style of writing or speaking changes. When did you last say "Thank thee" at the dinner table? So yes, it can be helpful to "update" a Bible translation to make it easier to read and understand. But if you *change* the meaning, that's no longer translating. It's lying.

A new "translation" of the Bible, called "Good as New," is being praised by the head of the Church of England even though it flatly contradicts clear biblical teaching in some areas such as sexuality and morality. Freely written largely in modern slang (the apostle Peter, for example, is called "Rocky" in the translation!), the new Bible changes the apostle Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 7:2 from "[to avoid] sexual immorality, let each man have his own wife, and let each woman have her own husband," to "My advice is for everyone to have a regular partner."

In this new translation, sex is a given, but marriage is optional, and so is the partner's gender! According to the "One" organization that produced the new Bible, it is dedicated to challenging "oppression, injustice, exclusion and discrimination" as well as accepting one another and "valuing their diversity and experience" (*World Net Daily*, June 24, 2004). But instead, they are changing the fundamental teachings of the Bible.

What does God think about changing His Word? In 2 Peter 3:16, God warns that "untaught and unstable" people would "twist" the Scriptures "to their own destruction." Modern translations of the Scriptures can be fine—as long as they are faithful to the original, inspired meaning of God's Word. Be careful which "translation" you use. To better understand God's Word, write for our free booklet *Is the Bible True?* and request our free *Bible Study Course* for a faithful explanation of the Scriptures.

Teen Bible Reading and Music Piracy

About 3 out of 10 American teens say they read the Bible at least once a week, while a slightly higher number—35 percent—say they never read the Bible. That leaves about another third of teens who read the Bible at least occasionally. So, Bible readers outnumber nonreaders by almost 2 to 1.

But do the (presumably) more biblically minded teens have more biblically based values? Another set of statistics seems troubling in this regard: Only 8 percent of American teens say music piracy (which the Bible and U.S. law both say is stealing) is morally wrong, and a full 80 percent of teens who say they have bought religious "praise" music in the last six months say they've also engaged in some sort of music piracy during that time.

In James 1:25 God encourages us to live faithfully according to His ways: "But he who looks into the perfect law of liberty and continues in it, and is not a forgetful hearer but a doer of the work, this one will be blessed in what he does" (Statistics compiled by Ted Olsen and posted June 25, 2004, on *Christianity Today* online).

New Expedition Searches for Noah's Ark

New satellite images of the northeastern slope of Mt. Ararat, near the border of Russia, Iran and Turkey, have inspired an American businessman to invest \$900,000 to send a joint U.S.-Turkish team there to see if a dark patch in the middle of a glacier might be the remains of Noah's ark. The pictures were taken during a record heat wave in the summer of 2003 that melted large amounts of snow and ice at the highest elevations of the perpetually snow-covered, 17,000-foot-high peak.

Scientists, adventurers and treasure hunters have been searching for centuries for remains of the ark. So far all the supposed arklike structures have turned out to be

natural features or have been too remote to reach. There have been many false accounts of people finding the ark. But the American, Daniel McGivern, says he's 90 percent sure about the location of the ark (*Christianity Today*, June 25, 2004). We'll see. It would be an exciting find, but our faith isn't based on whether someone can locate a 4,500-year-old boat. Genesis 8:4 says that Noah's ark came to rest on "the mountains of Ararat."

A Return to Modesty?

Girls, ever had trouble finding attractive, but modest clothes? So has Ella Gunderson of Redmond, Washington. So she decided to do something about it.

"Dear Nordstrom," she wrote, "I am an eleven-year-old girl who has tried shopping at your store for clothes (in particular jeans), but all of them ride way under my hips, and the next size up is too big and falls down.

"I see all of these girls who walk around with pants that show their belly button and underwear," she continued. "Your clerks suggest that there is only one look. If that is true, then girls are supposed to walk around half naked. I think that you should change that" (http://www.worldnetdaily.com/news/article.asp?ARTICLE_ID=38605).

Well, Nordstrom department store admitted it should do a better job catering to girls who want a more modest look. Hopefully more retailers will also realize the need to provide a selection for the increasing number of girls and women who are frustrated by the usual choice of "half shirt and hip hugger clothing that big companies have been pushing on women and girls." The Bible encourages modesty in 1 Timothy 2:9.

The Mind-Body Connection: Move Yourself to a Better Mood

Have you ever experienced "the blues"? Most people have felt down, anxious, worried, numb or sad—you fill in the blank. Prolonged feelings of sadness, usually for more than two weeks, can lead to depression.

One study found that in one decade (1987–1997) the number of Americans seeking professional help for mood disorders jumped from 1.7 million to 6.3 million (*HealthScoutNews*, Jan. 8, 2002). Mental illness has captured so much attention that Oct. 3-9 is National Mental Awareness Week.

Thankfully, there are some simple things that can help us get out of bad moods so we may not have to seek professional help.

Vigorous aerobic exercise produces a "runner's high" by releasing endorphins within our bodies. This type of activity produces overall feelings of well-being. We can achieve similar benefits by choosing an activity that we enjoy for just 10 minutes. Some activities include walking, bicycle riding, rollerblading, swimming, dancing and weight training.

By adding at least 30 minutes of physical activity to our day, we will gain health benefits for years to come, including feelings of well-being. So the next time you feel down, grab a buddy and go for a walk.



Cassandra Howard, M.S., ACSM, is fitness director at JPMorgan Chase.



Q&A

Q. I'm in the United Church of God, and when I try to talk to my friends about my beliefs, they often ask, "What are you?" They seem to be looking for a label. What should I tell them? I've been saying "first-century Christian," but I don't know how accurate or appropriate that is. Should I just say "Christian" and leave it at that?

A. Your answer, "first-century Christian," is certainly accurate since we trace our origin to the Church that Jesus founded in the early first century. This means we worship on

Saturdays and observe the biblical holidays as Jesus and the disciples did.

Because we have no association with any other religious organization or any denomination, the term "nondenominational Christian" could also be an answer to give to your friends. Your friends are probably most interested in knowing whether or not you belong to a Christian church, and the term "nondenominational" tells them that your church is not associated with one of the mainstream, large, well-known church organizations.

For more information about the United Church of God, read our free booklet *This Is the United Church of God*, which can be read or requested online at www.ucg.org/booklets/.

If you have a question, e-mail us at info@verticalthought.org

Met any strange Christians lately?



What would you think if you heard of Christians who don't keep Christmas or Easter and who meet to worship on Saturdays? Chances are, these people may sound a little strange to you and unlike any other Christians you know. You say, "There's no way these people can be Christians?" Well, give this some vertical thought.

Strange as it may seem, observing biblical Holy Days (like the Feast of Tabernacles instead of Christmas) and worshiping on Saturdays were the common practices of Christians of the early Church in the first century. And surprise! A small group of courageous Christians are dedicated to living today as Jesus, the apostles and the early Christians did.

Check out the stories inside, of young people committed to the only biblically authorized, original, authentic Christianity practiced by the early Christians. As you'll come to see, these people aren't strange. What *is* strange is that many people today claim to be Christian but *don't* live like Jesus, the apostles or the early Christians!



Holidays or Holy Days: Does It Matter Which Days We Keep?

Why do so many people embrace such silly fables as the tooth fairy,

the Easter Bunny and Santa Claus? If you're serious about knowing the *real* Christmas story, you need this free publication offered by the United Church of God. Request your copy online at www.verticalthought.org or by writing to our office in your area of the world from the list on page 22.

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