

PRAISE THE ALMIGHTY

A Newspaper with a Christian perspective

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Delhi government to give land for cemetery



Arnold James Delhi: The Delhi Minority Commission has revealed that the government is to provide land for the Christian community in the state free of cost for maintaining a cemetery.

The Delhi Minority Commission (DMC) had adopted an unanimous resolution to this effect on January 5, 2009. The DMC has informed the concerned Block Development Officer to take suitable action as per the Commission's decision.

This was revealed by DMC Member Arnold James at the first meeting of the Christian Advisory Committee (CAC), on 14 January 2009, set up by the DMC. The Christian Advisory Committee is to ensure safeguard/interest of Christian community and to bring its people in the mainstream of building the nation. It is constituted with ten members, Sister Nirmalini, Advocate Jenice Francis, Mark S Clive, Rev. Dr. N.C. George, Ms. Sushma Ramaswami, Dr. Sudhir Joseph, Very Rev. M.S. Skariah Ramban, Alok Michyari, Niranjana Lal and Rev. Jayan Thomas.

The availability of adequate

land for cemetery was a long standing demand of the Christian Community in Delhi. Arnold James has informed that there are two Cemetery Committees in Delhi, namely, the

Delhi Cemetery Committee and the Indian Cemetery Committee. However, following the request of Arch Bishop Vincent Concessao, the CAC has

(contd. on page 3)

Pastor T.M. Simon promoted to glory

Pastor T.M. Simon went to his heavenly home to receive his eternal reward on January 24, 2009 at 7:55 am. He was 72. Pastor T.M. Simon was born at Ranny, Kerala and started his career with Naval Flag office, Ministry of Defence, Bombay.

Obedient to the calling to serve God he resigned from his job in 1964 and studied under the tutelage of Pastor Kurien Thomas,



Itarsi. After that he planted many churches in the northern part of India.

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Celebrating 10 years of God's faithfulness

New Delhi: This issue of "PRAISE THE ALMIGHTY" you hold in your hands marks the successful completion of this newspaper's ten years in circulation.

PRAISE THE ALMIGHTY

was born in 1999 in the heart of Pastor M K Babu, who was then a businessman in south Delhi. Under his able leadership, a small team of committed Christians battled all odds to give shape to the initial issues. Over

the past 10 years, God has been extremely faithful to this ministry. Because of God's mercy, not a single issue has been missed since its inception. We thank God for enabling us to

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expose the sufferings of Christians around the world and to keep you informed of the news and events.

There is no dearth of Christian newsletters, newspapers and magazines. While many a newspaper dies a natural death, it is the consistent interest that you, as a reader, has shown us that has kept us going ahead. We thank you for your patronage, prayers and cooperation that has been key to the success of this publication. The editorial team is grateful to all who served this cause as honorary editors, managers, DTP and graphic designers, contributors, advertisers, well-wishers and subscribers. We are also grateful to critics and all those who sent in their feedback. We appreciate your continued encouragement.

Praise the Almighty thrives on the firm belief that Christians are united in the gospel and has consistently provided a medium for mutual understanding, respect and unity. Although we identify ourselves as belonging to different denominations and groups due to various historical reasons, we are united in the Lord. Our unity and awareness in the wake of increased opposition to the gospel and an intolerance towards religious diversity will

strengthen us all the more.

To mark the beginning of the 10th anniversary celebrations, a meeting was held on February the sixth, 2009 at the Delhi Diocesan Community Hall, 1 Ashoka Place, New Delhi - 110001. Many honourable dignitaries and distinguished Christian leaders graced this occasion. We have published a Souvenir-cum-Directory to commemorate this occasion. Further, we intend to honour a select number of senior Christian leaders who have been used mightily by God in and around Delhi by the end of this year.

God has given us a vision to expand this ministry, and so from this issue onwards you will see a notable expansion of the newspaper including a switch from a 12 page to 24 page edition. Furthermore, the frequency of the publication will be increased from monthly to fortnightly. Steps will also be taken in due course to circulate the newspaper widely by hand in the churches in New Delhi. Complimentary copies will be sent regularly to the Cabinet Ministers, Members of Parliament, political and key party leaders and all Christian organisations and church leaders.

We are also glad to inform you that we have launched a brand new website (www.PraiseTheAlmighty.com) in connection with our Anniversary Celebrations.

Delhi government to give...

(contd. from page 1)

acknowledged the need for an apex body to overlook these matters quite like the Wakf Board for Muslims.

The Member also stressed the need for organising a function frequently where the parents of Christian boys and girls could find suitable matches for marriages.

He expressed the need a Directory contains all the details of Christian NGOs, Organisations, Institutions, Churches, Professionals and Businessmen. He request the New Delhi YMCA Associate General Secretary Mark S Clive to take this responsibility and seek help of PRAISE THE ALMIGHTY in order to get the work done.

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Government Educational aid for children of minority groups

Delhi: The Delhi government has launched various welfare schemes for students of classes 8 through 12 who belong to various minority groups. This was announced by Shr. V. K. Bahal, Dy Director, Department of SC/ST/OBC/Minorities at the first meeting of Christian Advisory Committee (CAC).

These welfare measures include free supply of stationary, award of merit scholarships, reimbursement of tuition fees, merit scholarships in colleges, technical or professional institutions. There is also a Dr B R Ambedkar state award for students who are toppers.

In addition to these awards and schemes of the state government, there are various other welfare schemes sponsored by the Central Government for students belonging to minority communities. Under a "Merit cum Means scholarship scheme" educational aid would be provided to poor and meritorious

students belonging to Minority Communities for pursuing Technical and Professional Courses at degree and post-graduate levels from a recognized institution. An amount of Rs. 29.97 lacs has been sanctioned under this scheme by the Govt. of India to cover 132 beneficiaries for the year 2007-08. A provision of Rs. 75 lacs has been proposed for the current financial year 2008-09 to cover the target of 257 beneficiaries.

Under the Scheme of Post-Matric Scholarship for Students belonging to the Minority Communities (100% Centrally Sponsored), scholarship would be provided to the Minority Communities pursuing higher education, from class XI up to Ph.D, and technical and vocational courses of Industrial Training Institutes/Industrial Training Centres (affiliated with NCVT) in Government school/college/institute or school/college/institute recognized by

appropriate authority. A provision of Rs. 110 lacs has been proposed for the current financial year 2008-09 to cover the target of 964 beneficiaries

There is also a scheme for providing free coaching to candidates belonging to Minority Communities with the objective to assist them in their preparation for qualifying or competitive examinations. More information on these schemes can be had from the Union Ministry of Minority Affairs website <http://minorityaffairs.gov.in/newsite/schemes/schemes.asp>.

By "minority" community, the government means Muslims, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhist and Parsis, In all these schemes, a student must have attained 50% marks in the previous qualifying examination and his family's collective income must not exceed Rs. 1 lakh per annum. An affidavit (either from self or employer) on non-judicial stamp paper is sufficient to make

income claims.

Thirty percent of the scholarship amount is reserved for girl students. The distribution of scholarship among the states will be on the basis of the state's population and the distribution within a state among the various minority groups. Admission fee of up to Rs. 500 per annum and Tuition fee up to Rs. 350 per month respectively is available (subject to actuals) to eligible students of Std I to X. For hostelers of std VI to X, a maintenance fee of Rs. 600 per month is available. For day scholars, this will be Rs. 100 p.m for student of std I to X.

Only two students from a family are eligible for scholarships. In order to receive continued support, a student must secure at least 50% marks in every annual examination. Application for scholarship has to be renewed every academic year. All payments will be made directly to the school's bank account.

Swiss bank accounts: Shocking revelations

New Delhi: This is so shocking. If black money deposits was an Olympics event. India would have won a gold medal hands down. The second best Russia has 4 times lesser deposit. U.S. is not even there in the counting in top five! India has more money in

Swiss banks than all the other countries combined!

Recently, due to international pressure, the Swiss government agreed to disclose the names of the

account holders only if the respective governments formally asked for it. Indian government is not asking for the details, no marks for guessing why?

Is India poor, who says? Ask the Swiss banks. With personal account deposit of \$1,500 billion in foreign reserve which have been misappropriated, an amount 13 times larger than the country's foreign debt, one needs to rethink if India is a poor country? DISHONEST INDUSTRIALISTS, scandalous politicians and corrupt

IAS, IRS, IPS officers have deposited in foreign banks in their illegal personal accounts a sum of about \$1500 billion, which have been misappropriated by them.

With this amount 45 crore poor people can get Rs 1,00,000 each. This

Is India poor, who says? Ask the Swiss banks. With personal account deposit bank of \$1,500 billion in foreign reserve which have been misappropriated, an amount 13 times larger than the country's foreign debt, one needs to rethink if India is a poor country?

huge amount has been appropriated from the people of India by exploiting and betraying them. Once this huge amount of black

money and property comes back to India, the entire foreign debt can be repaid in 24 hours. After paying the entire foreign debt, we will have surplus amount, almost 12 times larger than the foreign debt. If this surplus amount is invested in earning interest, the amount of interest will be more than the annual budget of the Central government. So even if all the taxes are abolished, then also the Central government will

be able to maintain the country very comfortably.

Some 80,000 people travel to Switzerland every year, of whom 25,000 travel very frequently. 'Obviously, these people won't be tourists. They must be travelling there for some other reason,' believes an official involved in tracking illegal money.. And, clearly, he isn't referring to the commerce ministry bureaucrats who've been flitting in and out of Geneva ever since the World Trade Organisation (WTO) negotiations went into a tailspin!

Black money in Swiss banks — Swiss Banking Association report, 2006 details bank deposits in the territory of Switzerland by nationals of following countries: TOP FIVE

INDIA -	\$1,456 BILLION
RUSSIA -	\$470 BILLION
U.K. -	\$390 BILLION
UKRAINE-	\$100 BILLION
CHINA -	\$96 BILLION

Now do the math's - India with \$1,456 billion or \$1.4 trillion has more money in Swiss banks than rest of the world combined. Public loot since 1947.

Can we bring back our money? It is one of the biggest loots witnessed by mankind — the loot of the Aam Aadmi (common man) since 1947, by his brethren occupying public office. It

has been orchestrated by politicians, bureaucrats and some businessmen.

The list is almost all-encompassing. No wonder, everyone in India loots with impunity and without any fear. What is even more depressing in that this ill-gotten wealth of ours has been stashed away abroad into secret bank accounts located in some of the world's best known tax havens. And to that extent the Indian economy has been stripped of its wealth. Ordinary Indians may not be exactly aware of how such secret accounts operate and what are the rules and regulations that go on to govern such tax havens. However, one may well be aware of 'Swiss bank accounts,' the shorthand for murky dealings, secrecy and of course pilferage from developing countries into rich developed ones.

It is estimated by experts that one per cent of the world's population holds more than 57 per cent of total global wealth, routing it invariably through these tax havens.

How much of this is from India is anybody's guess.

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- Selected

VP appeals for laws for protection of minorities

New Delhi: Addressing the annual conference of State Minority Commissions organized under auspices of Delhi State Minority Commission, the Vice President of India, Mr. Hamid Ansari appealed to the government to immediately frame a law on the pattern of SC-ST Atrocities (Prevention) Act 1989 in order to bolster the sense of security among minorities. Remarkably, no representative from ministry for minorities affair attended the conference.

Suggesting to the government to consider conferring the same powers to investigate into referred cases as have been given to National Human Rights Commission and SC/ST Commission, the vice president said, "National Minority Commission and its state level units were formed to protect the rights of all minorities and inculcate the sense of security in them but experience shows that this approach has been ineffective to some extent."

However, he confided, "Lack of will and softness in approach may also be the reasons" and stressed, "Recent incidents in various parts of

the country have added to minorities' concern for security." He expressed concern over state governments' failure to provide adequate security in such cases.

Earlier, in his welcome speech, the chairman of National Minority Commission Mohammad Shafi Qureshi appealed to the government to control terrorism and communalism immediately asserting that "Both these curses are affecting the social fabric and the economy deeply."

While various state commissions demanded the government solution to minority problems through the Planning Commission, the do Delegates from various states demanded a government mechanism to take government schemes to minorities. They also reiterated their demand to empower Minority Commission like a civil court and frame a model act for minorities' protection.

The issues discussed in the conference include Delhi Slaughter House Case, IIM Schools for minorities, scholarships and free coaching, more publicity to minority schemes in both rural and urban areas.

Pastor T.M. Simon promoted to glory

(contd. from page 1)

He moved to America in 1970 where he completed his Theological Education at Florida Bible College and Tennessee Temple Seminary and University. He came back to India in 1974 and continued the work that God entrusted him in north India.

He got married in 1968 with Kunjamma David. From 1974 - 83 he worked along with Pastor M K Chacko at Pentecostal Church of God, Green Park. In 1983 he founded New Testament Church Mission and continued to be Senior Pastor and President of the organisation until his death.

Pastor Simon was passionate in teaching the Word of God to all those who loved to learn. He was an approachable encouraging servant of God. He was a helping hand for the people in need and generous with a cheerful heart. He was a man of great principles following Christ centered leadership of serving other first. He was a man of great faith, never wavering from the

course of high calling, and never compromising on God's Word.

Pastor Simon loved India and its people. He was very patriotic man and loved the armed forces and respected the service of men who protected the land of India.

He loved Hindi, English, Urdu and Malayalam literature. His oratorical skills and command on all these languages had always a great impact and transformation on the listeners.

He consistently served his Master though there were many challenges in his life. He found joy in serving God even in the time sickness and diseases. Indeed, he has left a legacy that people of God can remember and follow.

His earthly body was buried in the presence of hundreds of servants of God at Kashmere Gate cemetery. Pastor Iqbal Masih performed the funeral service.

He is survived by his wife Mrs. Kunjamma Simon and three sons and their wives and five grand children.

Remembering martyrdom of Christians in Orissa

Rev. Dr. Richard Howell

On January 22, 1999 Graham Stuart Staines (aged 58) and his sons Phillip (aged 9) and Timothy (aged 7) were burnt alive for their faith in Christ and service to the poor. Since August 2008 onward at least 67 followers of Christ have witnessed to their faith by martyrdom.

Remembering Truthfully

If we do not remember Orissa martyrdom and name it publicly it remains invisible. To the outside observer, the martyrdom of Christian and the violence of the persecutors will go unseen. However public remembering of wrongs is an act that acknowledges them and is therefore also an act of justice. Acknowledgement is essential to personal and social healing. The remembrance must be truthful.

What is Martyrdom?

To associate martyrdom simply with pain, blood and gruesome murder is not a correct picture of the experience. Martyrdom is an integral facet of what Christian faith and conduct may fully demand. It's the decisive event to witness to faith in Christ and to the power of God's grace through the response of the martyr.

To those of us who are alive, martyrdom is a persuasive challenge to evaluate our love for God and love for neighbour. It's a reality check and a chilling reminder of evil in human nature.

Justice and Love

Eight-year-old Sabrina mustered courage on January 25, 1999 to register her protest in front of the Supreme Court of India. Print media in many parts of the world published the slogan card she carried "Burn Hatred Not Children." Her symbolic protest demanded justice after a frenzied mob with flaming torches burnt alive two innocent children Philip and Timothy and their father Graham Stuart Staines, in their jeep in Manoharpur, Orissa on January 22, 1999.

Graham Staines, an Australian missionary, had personally nursed leprosy patients in a Home in Baripada, Orissa since 1983. He was a loving and compassionate friend of inmates of various religions. In contrast, the persecutors, inciting ideologies of hatred, were convinced their

action served the nation. No right-thinking person could support such an ideology.

In the face of Staines's martyrdom Gladys, widow of Graham stated, "I have no anger. I have no hatred. I forgive them." People asked Gladys, "How could you forgive?" Such forgiving is not natural, but we believe it comes from Christ and reveals true Christian character.

Some question shouldn't the perpetrator who are truly guilty be dealt with as they deserve to be treated with the strict enforcement of retributive justice? It needs to be stated that Christian love of the enemy, does not exclude the concerns for justice but goes beyond it, to forgiveness and reconciliation.

The extent of abuse in Orissa should not overwhelm the Church's capacity to think of loving our abusers, of wishing them well, of seeking to do good for them and of working to establish a human bond with them. As the Church we journey together with God revealed in Jesus Christ who loves even our enemies.

For evil to totally succeed requires that when an evil action is committed it is responded to with violence and retribution. This continues the spiral of evil. Instead of returning evil for evil, we must heed the scripture and try to overcome evil with good (Romans 12:21).

Interpreting Suffering

Suffering is part of Christian identity however it cannot consist in simply in what we remember. It's vital how we remember. The Church must integrate the humiliation, pain and martyrdom as part of Churches life story. Healing takes place not so much by remembering traumatic events and their accompanying emotions. Rather by interpreting memories and inscribing them into larger pattern of meaning, making them part of our

identity.

Suffering can make us better persons; it can draw us closer to God or make us more empathetic with others who suffer. It can bring the various Christian denominations together in unity.

The martyrdom of Christians in

Orissa has contributed in exposing the injustice of Orissa government that controls its citizens, curtailed their freedoms, and sacrificed their well being out of a commitment to a destructive and unworkable ideology.

The means of healing and reconciliation is the interpretative work the Church does with the memory of suffering and martyrdom in Orissa.

Remembering the Martyrs:

24th August: Rasan-anda Pradhan of Rupag-aon village

25th August: 1. Bikr-am Naik of Tiangia village, 2. Das-aratha Pra-dhan of Tia-ngia village, 3. Surendra Naik of Tiangia village, 4. Jaka Naik of Budamaha village, 5. Gapana Nayak of Budamaha village, 6. Nanamati Naik of Bakingia village, 7. Rajesh Digal of Bataguda village, 8. Sunaphulo Nayak of Tiangia village.

26th August: 1. Akbar Digal of Sulesaru village, 2. Gunduri Nayak of Budamaha village, 3. Bastina Mantry of Bhalipada village, 4. Meri Digal of Barakhama village, 5. Nabaghana Nayak of Paderkia village, 6. Prafulla Nayak of Badimu-nda village, 7. Sideshwar Digal of Sulesaru village, 8. Pastor Samuel Naik(Nayak) of Bakingia village.

27th August: 1. Pastor Gayadhar Digal of Phiringia village, 2. Pastor Dibya Sunder Digal of Sipaeju village, 3. Pastor Daniel Nayak of Bakingia village, 4. Bidyadhar Digal of Dugabadi village, 5. Trinath Digal of Tiangia village, 6. Sadana-nda Pradhan of Telapali village, 7. Anthon Digal of Telapali village, 8. Parikhita Nayak of Telapali village, 9. Kasiben of Raikia burnt to death, 10. An Adventist believer of Digi village beheaded, 11. Baxi Bandhu of Lumungia village.

30th August: 1. Roma-ni Naik of Bakingia village; mother of Sam-uel Naik burnt alive, 2. Daniel Naik of Bakin-gia village, 3. Michael Naik of Bakingia village.

31st August: 1. Baxi Bandhu of

Lumungia beheaded.

9th September: 1. Mathew Naik of Sarangada village, 2. Purander Mallick of Nilungia village.

20th September: 1. Iswar Digal of Gatringia village.

30th September: 1. Meghanath Digal of Bisipada village, 2. Priyatam-ma Digal of Bisipada village.

3rd October: 1. Shyam Sunder of Sindhpal village.

28th October: 1. Father Bernard Digal of Sulesaru village.

24th November: 1. Leunsio Digal died in Daringabadi Relief Camp.

25th November: 1. Lalita Digal of Dobali village.

16th December: 1. Jubraj Digal of Ganjamendi Village,

2. Janamati Nayak of Bakingia village, 3. Jecob Digal of Petapanga village, 4. Kamolini Nayak of Mondakia village, 5. 12 year old girl died in a relief camp in K.Nuagaon,

6. Romesh Digal of Bakingia village 7. Joseph Digal (Place unknown), 8. Khogeswar Pradhan, 9. Pastor Daniel Mallick of Bakingia 10. Mishra Digal of Balliguda 11. Sureshon Nayak.

Gajapati District

26th August: 1. Mukunda Burdh-an of Mukundapure, 2. Kumuda Bardhan of Mukundapure village

3. Unknown person from Parlakhemundi village.

2nd December: 1. Dhanyavad Lima in Ramgiri Relief Camp.

Nawarangpur

25th August: 1. Unknown person killed from Papahandi village.

Nayagarh

31st August: 1. Abhimonyu Nayak of Barapalli village.

Rayagarh

30th August: 1. Ramakant of Ramannaguda village,

2. Balu of Ramannaguda village.

Unless we are ready to die for Christ, we are no longer ready to live for Him

(Author: Rev. Dr. Richard Howell, General Secretary, Evangelical Fellowship of India, New Delhi)

-Selected.

Christian love of the enemy, does not exclude the concerns for justice but goes beyond it, to forgiveness and reconciliation.

Anti-Christian discrimination in Manipur

Imphal: A National Fact Finding team from New Delhi met the victims of anti Christian discrimination at Chingmeirong Rongmei Village here on January 15, 2009, and examined the customary laws of the village council. The fact finding team found some of customary laws are unconstitutional and are used to restrict the rights of Christians to practice their faith.

The unconstitutional section of the Chingmeirong Rongmei Village council, pasted on the notice board on the village gate in Manipuri is translated as: "No Christian activities and propagation within Chingmeirong Kabui (Rongmei) village Ward No. 173, any living person violating this order will be punished under the rules and regulation of the village council - By Order Village Council/Village Chief, Chingmeirong."

Mr. Madhu Chandra, spokesperson of the North East Support Centre & Helpline and Regional Secretary of the All India Christian Council (aicc),

said, "The unconstitutional order of Chingmeirong Rongmei Village Council violates the fundamental rights provided in Indian Constitution and United Nations' Universal Declaration of Fundamental Rights."

The aicc appealed to the Chingmeirong Rongmei Village Council in a separate letter dated January 27, 2009, to revoke the unconstitutional section of customary law of the village council. The law prohibits any member of the village to bring and adopt any religion other than the indigenous religion of the Rongmei tribe. Fines and penalties are Rs 5000, a large pig, a large jar of rice bear, and expulsion of the

person(s) from the village. Failing to revoke the unconstitutional section of resolution of Chingmeirong Rongmei

Village Council, the aicc reserves its rights to seek the constitutional validity of the resolution in courts of law.

Under this law, three families from Chingmeirong Rongmei village were penalised. Kaphun Kamei, around 50

years old, along with his wife and children were the latest victims. Their house cum church building was dismantled by villagers on December 14, 2008, after imposing the fines prescribed by the village council.

Past incidents of the diktat ordered by the village council against Christians include the following as re-

ported by the Sangai Express on September 13, 2007. Kahaolung Malungmei was fined a pig and rice beer jar and later banished from the village for becoming a Christian on October 12, 1995. On July 16, 1997, Kumari Kalingjon was fined Rs 5000. Kaphun Malangmei was fined Rs 5000 and chased out of the village after his house was burned on July 10, 2006.

Mr. Chandra, in a memorandum dated December 17, 2008, appealed to the Manipur State Human Rights Commission to look into the unconstitutional rules and regulations of Chingmeirong Rongmei Village Council and act accordingly.

The Fact Finding Team was led by Delhi-based human rights activist Mr. Madhu Chandra along with Manipur state branch official Rev. Nipamcha - aicc state chapter president, Rev. N. Debendra Singh, Kh. Chaoba - aicc state chapter secretary and Aheibam Chandramani - aicc state chapter joint secretary.

"No Christian activities and propagation within Chingmeirong Kabui (Rongmei) village Ward No. 173, any living person violating this order will be punished under the rules and regulation of the village council"

Sponsored gods adorn government offices

Why should some governments in a secular country favour a particular religion? Though India is declared to be a secular democratic republic, minority religions do not often get equal treatment from the authorities. Mini temples, temple music, etc. are run in government offices by authorities at the cost of public exchequer. The scene is glaring in Orissa.

He may have declared that "every bone" in his body is secular, but in Orissa Chief Minister Naveen Patnaik's seat of power, Hindu gods and goddesses jostle for space with sweaty babus, steel almirahs, dusty files and even urinals.

Although gods and governance are not supposed to go hand in hand in any secular regime, the preponderance of Hindu religious symbols and deities in the state Secretariat of communal-strife-torn Orissa is especially remarkable.

Only the lack of priests and chanting distinguish some parts of the State Secretariat from a temple. For example, were it not for the signboard above it, the entrance to the Commerce and Transport Department, complete with an appliqué canopy and idols of Lord Jagannath, Lord Balabhadra and Goddess Subhadra — Orissa's holy trinity — looks just like a shrine.

Nityananda Sahu, a peon in the Transport Department, has ensured

that the office space does double duty as a place of worship. Religious rituals are as much part of his daily routine as are pushing files and paperwork. "The Lord came in my dreams and asked me to keep him here," said Sahu, gesturing towards the makeshift temple that has been here since 1995. An idol of lord Jagannath presides over a pristine tiled floor, while lord Vishnu and goddess Laxmi gaze down benevolently from a huge laminated poster.

Other government departments are not far behind and a first-time visitor is more likely to bump into gods and goddesses than toiling babus in the labyrinthine and often dingy corridors.

In the Plan section of the Finance Department, a more elaborate temple than the one in the Commerce and Transport Department is the cynosure of all eyes. The idols are more ornately dressed and are a fetching contrast to the drab files and dour clerks.

At the entrance to the Labour and

Employment Department, Lord Jagannath and his consorts are comfortably poised on a rather garishly coloured concrete pedestal next to the room of department Secretary Ashok Tripathi. However, the idol that could really do with divine intervention is

Only the lack of priests and chanting distinguish some parts of the State Secretariat from a temple. The entrance to the Commerce and Transport Department, complete with an appliqué canopy and idols of various gods looks just like a shrine.

that of Goddess Tarini in the office of the Directorate of Resettlement and Rehabilitation. Pushed into a dank corner, she has only a malodorous urinal for

company.

But these bedecked offices raise questions that go much deeper than decorating trends. "Idols or images of any religion have no place in any government office. Why should the government allow it in the first place? This is sheer hypocrisy. Naveen may be claiming that his bones are secular, but his flesh and blood are not secular," says John Dayal of the All Indian Christian Council. Agrees a senior IAS officer: "It's a blatant violation of government rules. In a secular country no religious symbol can be displayed in government offices.

What if tomorrow some people start building small mosque inside one of the departments?"

A solution to this violation of policy, is not easily found. Special Secretary in the General Administration Department Manoranjan Sharan told The Indian Express: "There is nothing in the rules that say such a thing can be prevented."

Meanwhile, even the priests are raising questions at the mushrooming of idols inside the Secretariat. "Gods should be kept in a clean and sacred place. No one is allowed to go near the idols with shoes on and certainly not with cigarettes dangling from their lips. But in government offices, this is exactly what goes on. This is sacrilege," said Rabi Pratihari, a member of the managing committee of the Jagannath temple at Puri.

And if the gods and goddesses in the state Secretariat were not enough, shrines have also cropped up inside police stations in Cuttack, giving plenty of ammunition to those who slammed the Orissa police for its debatable secular credentials during the Kandhamal riots. At Madhupatna police station, more than 10,000 people from all walks of life, including criminals, are invited to the feast every year during Dussehra. So is the case with the feasts at the police stations at Jagatpur, Manglabag and Purihat.

- Selected.

The Great Kerala Debate on Jewellery

Philip P Eapen

"Is it right to wear jewellery?" This question - about a decades-old-practice among Keralite Pentecostals, of renouncing jewellery - has been beaten to death long ago. Discussions in Pentecostal newspapers, magazines, websites, and youth camps/conferences have never been complete without a heated debate about jewellery. These discussions have yielded precious little in terms of tangible results. Neither have these discussions reformed Kerala Pentecostal churches nor has it resulted in a mass exodus of dissidents from these churches into the so-called "new generation" churches.

Why doesn't a discussion about jewellery yield any positive result - either way - in Kerala or among Kerala Pentecostals? The answer is simple: Ask the wrong questions and you will get wrong answers! We should for a while refrain from raising the question "Is it right to wear jewellery?" (By the way, "ornaments" is not the proper word here.) Instead, we should ask the following questions:

1. Is it right for the church to deny baptism to a repentant believer just because he or she wears jewellery?

2. Is it right for the church to deny someone fellowship at the Lord's Table just because he or she wears jewellery?

It is a recognised fact that most Pentecostals of Kerala deny water baptism and fellowship at the Lord's Table to believers who wear jewellery. After finding answers to the above questions, we may examine the Biblical passages that deal with the wearing of jewellery with utmost care in interpretation.

PART 1

First things first! Is the group of Pentecostal churches of Kerala origin (spread out all over the globe) justified in denying water baptism to a believer who wears jewelry?

Baptism and Holy Communion are ordinances in the Church that were established by the Lord Jesus Christ. In fact, these are the only two ordinances recognized by Pentecostals in general. Therefore, it is all the more important that we pay great attention to the way we administer these ordinances. **An error in matters related to these ordinances is an affront to the Lord Jesus Christ and a threat to the very essence of the gospel.** It can invite the wrath of God, as we shall soon see.

Water baptism is the ordinance that officially admits a repentant believer into the Body of Christ, the Church. Baptism inaugurates a Christian's walk with Christ in the newness of life. The old sinful self is considered to be buried with Christ and the person comes out of the waters of baptism to live a new life in Christ just as Christ rose from the dead. The only condition that

Scripture lays down for administering baptism is a genuine confession of faith in the risen Lord Jesus Christ and in his atoning death.

When a person becomes a Christian, he or she should be baptised at the earliest. Unless someone in the Church offers baptism, this person cannot take baptism! A believer cannot baptise himself or herself! If the believer understands the importance of water baptism, his or her anguish at the denial of baptism is great indeed. Therefore, first, just by considering the pain caused by the denial, it may be said that a denial of water baptism without a due biblical reason is an abuse of authority or privilege.

Christians who deny water baptism to new converts are like watchmen who stand at the entrance of a city denying entrance to refugees who seek an asylum. And yet, Kerala Pentecostals have been like these wicked watchmen. For several decades, Pentecostals and Brethren churches in Kerala denied baptism to converts just because the latter insisted on wearing jewellery. Are Pentecostals justified in imposing such conditions on new converts? The New Testament is exceptionally kind to those who seek membership in the Church. In his landmark verdict at the first Jerusalem Council, apostle Peter made this principle abundantly clear to everyone: **no restrictions may be imposed on new converts who seek entrance to the Church except the few restrictions mentioned in Acts 15: 28-29.**

"For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay no greater burden on you than these requirements: You must abstain from eating food offered to idols, from consuming blood or eating the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality. If you do this, you will do well. Farewell."

New converts were asked to abstain just from:

1. Participation in idol worship
2. Eating of blood or the meat of animals whose blood was not drained off as mentioned in Genesis 9:4 and Deut 12:24
3. Sexual immorality

If the Holy Spirit and the early apostles felt that no greater "burden" be laid on new converts, who are we to impose other burdens? Kerala's Pentecostals are like the Judaizers of the first century who told Gentile converts: "Unless you get circumcised, you cannot be a Christian." In other words, Gentile Christians had to become Jews before they could get salvation from a Jewish Messiah! Getting circumcised is the first step towards become a Jew. Converts to Judaism had to observe the Sabbath and all the Law of Moses.

Therefore, circumcision was not the only issue of that time. In all of Paul's letters and in the Judaizers' teachings, the mention of circumcision was a short way of referring to one's conversion to Judaism. Just imagine! Those Judaizers believed that Gentiles can get salvation only if they first became Jews! What would be our reaction if someone said that to us today? We would vehemently oppose such a teaching.

The apostle Paul did just that through his epistle to Romans and Galatians. He believed that Gentiles can be a part of the Church without first becoming Jews. To prove that point, he wrote at length about the importance of faith in receiving God's salvation. He even said that anyone who imposes Judaism on new converts is preaching a different gospel - a crime that deserved a curse.

"I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be

accursed. (Galatians 1:6-8)

And yet, Kerala Pentecostals commit the very same sin that the Judaizers of first century Church! They say, "Unless you become like us and stop wearing jewellery, you cannot gain entrance into the Body of Christ; we will not baptize you." How outrageous! Remember, Peter's list of restrictions to be imposed on new converts does not include a ban on jewellery or the other things that we commonly talk about. I know Pentecostals who refuse to baptise new converts who sport a mustache or a beard! Are we greater than the Holy Spirit or the apostle Peter to impose new restrictions on new converts and to deny them water baptism?

I have heard all the excuses that Kerala Pentecostals put forward to defend their position. The most ludicrous argument goes like this: "We are following a good tradition." Tradition? Since when did tradition become a source of authority for Pentecostals? Didn't these Pentecostals make fun of Roman Catholics and members of other Episcopal churches for taking refuge in traditions?

And there are others who say that

jewellery falls under the category of idol worship which is mentioned in Peter's list. According to them, all jewellery is rooted in idolatry. It is true that certain items of jewellery are linked to idols. We know that Indians generally wear images of their gods or goddesses on their necklaces or rings. Some jewellery is worn after the performance of idolatrous rituals. However, it is foolish to say that all jewellery is rooted in idol worship.

Finally, returning to our first question, is it right for the Pentecostals in Kerala to deny baptism to believers who wear jewellery? By all means, no! This is not only a mistake but also a sin. This denial has no biblical precedent. It distorts the simplicity of the gospel and challenges the authority of Jesus Christ. This practice of forcing on old tradition – a mere tradition – on new converts is a classic case of spiritual abuse and misuse of a privilege.

PART 2

Now, to the second question: Is it right for Kerala Pentecostals to deny fellowship in the Lord's Table to baptized believers who wear jewellery?

Consider this situation. A Pentecostal family - members of an international Pentecostal denomination in Bangalore – is visiting with your "Kerala" church. Your pastor lets the man partake in the Lord's Table but asks the woman to stay away from it. What might be the reason for this discrimination? The woman was denied access to the Lord's Table just because she wore jewellery! If the woman should later question the pastor about this exclusion, the best possible answer he might give is, "This is our age-old practice, a valued tradition."

The situation I described is not a rarity in Kerala Pentecostal churches. Week after week, month after month, such scenes are repeated in these churches. Preachers from overseas are loved and respected for their excellent teaching from the Bible. They are also seen as birds that lay golden eggs! But when it comes to the Lord's Table, even they are excluded! Born-again, baptised Christians who regularly partake in the Lord's Table in their own churches are denied such fellowship in Kerala Pentecostal churches. This is very similar to what happened in the early church. I shall explain.

The Apostle Paul and Peter were dining with a group of Gentile Christians in Antioch. Just then, some "staunch" Jewish Christians arrived there. In order to avoid offending these Judaizers, Peter quickly rose from the table and walked away. When he saw the Jews, he wanted them to know that he too was a strict Jew who wouldn't eat with Gentiles. Other Jewish Christians, including Barnabas, imitated Peter and quickly distanced themselves from the Gentile brethren at the table. The Gentile Christians were suddenly lowered to

the level of "untouchables" – as if they did not belong to the Body of Christ. When Paul saw Peter's double standards, he quickly confronted him in order to protect the "truth of the gospel" (See Galatians 2:11f) .

The heart of the matter here is that these Jewish Christians believed that only Jews belonged to the "people of God" or the "body of Christ." Until and unless Gentiles became a part of this "people of God" they couldn't be a part of the Church. And until then, these Judaizers wouldn't even eat with these Gentiles. Therefore the dining table became a place where their definition of the "Church" was made visible. **Those whom they considered to be a part of the "Church" or "people of God" were allowed to eat with them and those whom they considered as aliens to the "Church" were excluded from the table fellowship.**

This was nothing short of a heresy. It went against the grain of the gospel which said that God was saving Jewish sinners and Gentile sinners to create a new body called "the Church." This heresy also proclaimed that salvation was only for Jews. "First become a Jew and then become a member of the Church," said these Jewish Christians to the Gentiles. (In Kerala, Pentecostals say something similar to this: "First become a Malayali, and then take baptism and join the church.")

When one chooses to be a Jew (that is, to be circumcised in the case of males) he or she has to obey all of the Law (See Galatians 5:3). And by choosing to be under the Law, this person decides to reject God's free offer of grace. He/she rejects Jesus Christ and His work on the cross (See Galatians 5:2, 4). This is what Paul refers to as a "fall from grace." When a person falls into sin, he doesn't fall from grace. He continues to receive God's grace (Rom 5:20b). However, if he relies on his Jewish religious identity to find acceptance before God (instead of coming to God as a poor sinner who has nothing to boast about), he ends up rejecting God's free grace for helpless sinners. Thus, he "falls from grace." To reject God's grace is to reject the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The wonderful thing about the gospel is that it creates a new body of "God's people" called the "Church". Ethnic identity, family history, traditions, gender and race do not determine whether one is a member of this "Body" of Christ. Any one who believes in Jesus Christ and is baptised in water gains an official, public entry into this Body. **The Holy Communion or the Lord's Table is one definitive way in which this group of "God's people" celebrate their relationship with Jesus and with one another.** A person who is not a member of the Church (including excommunicated people) is not permitted to partake of this

sacred meal. Therefore, to know who is "in" or "out" of the Church, just watch who partakes of the Lord's Table!

If a person who is a genuine member of the Church is denied fellowship at the Lord's Table, the pastors or leaders behind this denial are guilty of making a false judgement. It is the Lord's Table, not their's. It is the Lord who should decide whether someone is in or out of his church. The Church can excommunicate a member on valid grounds. Wearing jewellery is NOT a valid ground for excommunication.

Now do you realize what it means to exclude someone from the Lord's Table? It is equivalent to excommunicating a person from the Church, which is the "Body of Christ." Pentecostal churches of Kerala origin have virtually excommunicated all of the global church from their fellowship! Any Christian who wears jewellery is considered as being a stranger to the Body of Christ. They have created a fenced territory within God's larger territory and have called this small area "the Church." They have excluded people whom God has included in His fold. How strange! And how dangerous!

The passage that they read during the Communion clearly says that anyone who eats or drinks at the Lord's Table in an unworthy manner – **without discerning the Lord's body** – is eating and drinking condemnation. What does it mean to discern the Lord's body? It is to recognize that the bread used in the Communion is not just another piece of bread. It is to recognize that it symbolises the body of Christ that was broken for us; it symbolises the Body of Christ, which is the Church. When we eat it, we declare that we have fellowship with Christ and membership in His Church. Discerning the Lord's body also requires us to recognize a brother or sister in the Lord as part of the Church. If we misjudge a genuine member of the Lord's Church and deny him/her communion at the Lord's Table, **we are failing to discern the extent of the Lord's body.** We fail to recognize the Lord's body. The Pentecostal churches of Kerala origin that regularly misjudge genuine Christians and deny them access to the Lord's Table are guilty of misjudging the Lord's body. And therefore, these leaders and pastors are eating and drinking judgement.

Almost all the things that Paul talks about Judaizers are applicable to these leaders and to their followers to live to please them! Look at the strong words that Paul uses to describe Judaizers:

1 They are "false brethren" who always are uncomfortable with the liberty that Gentile Christians enjoyed (Galatians 2:4). Similarly, these Kerala Pentecostals are uncomfortable with Christians who

take full advantage of their liberty in Christ. They make fun of these new generation churches and brand them as "necklace Pentecostals" or "golden Pentecostals." They sit in judgement and condemn others as those who lack "holiness" and "separation" – concepts that they themselves do not understand well.

1 "They only want you to be circumcised so they can brag about it" (Gal 6:13). Kerala Pentecostalism is all about bragging about one's "holiness" and "separation." Preachers brag about their success in getting a woman to renounce her jewellery than in rejoicing that a sinner was saved by grace. They despise any Christian who wears jewellery. Even a colourful dress or a nice hairdo can raise their eyebrows and set their tongues wagging. White clothes that have yellowed over the years, a clean shaven face, shirt that is not tucked in, simple *chappals* that expose dirty toes are all marks of godliness and "separation." In the case of women, it's worse. Untrimmed and dishevelled hair that dangles like an animal's tail make a Malayali Pentecostal woman stand out in the crowd in Metro cities. And all this, when their men walk about in wearing silk ties and suits. There is no shortage of boasting about "holiness."

Let me take the liberty to adapt Paul's words for this debate (Gal 6:14-15) :

As for me, God forbid that I should boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Because of that cross, my interest in this world died long ago, and the world's interest in me is also long dead. It doesn't make any difference now whether we have *renounced jewellery* or not. What counts is whether we really have been changed into new and different people.

By focussing on their great "sacrifice" of renouncing jewellery, these Pentecostals have shifted their attention from "boasting in the cross." How can we boast in the "cross" if we have other things to boast about in the presence of God? Only those who do not have anything to boast about will take refuge in what Christ did for them on the cross.

PART 3

Now that we have seen how serious an offence it is to deny water baptism or the Holy Communion to people just because they wore jewellery, we shall now examine whether the Bible prohibits the wearing of jewellery. Instead of a blanket prohibition, does the Bible at least suggest that Christians should not wear jewellery?

Those who engage in lengthy debates quote several scripture portions from the Bible. Many of these cited passages are not at all relevant for this discussion. Such misuse or abuse of scriptures is an indication of how shallow our knowledge of the Bible is. For

(contd. on page)

Prayer awakening has awakening

By Miss Delite Sam



CHILDREN ARE THE FUTURE

Children are the future of any nation. Nations perish when its future generation perishes. So God was always concerned how children are raised up while they are growing. That is why the Bible clearly exhorts us to "train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it." Proverbs 2: 6

Children, especially those who believe in the Lord Jesus, all over the world are experiencing a deeper insight about the Living God. They are moved with the Spirit of repentance, prayer, intercession and developing a sensitive heart to the Holy Spirit. Children in Prayer - CiP - movement facilitates in getting all those who are engaged in children's ministries connected and share the resources.

The second Global consultation of Children in Prayer was held in Chennai, India, from 2-7th July 2008. New India Evangelistic Association also had a representation along with delegates from 40 nations across the globe.

Little Noah prayed and God gave bicycles.

Four year old little Noah, in the USA, drew a picture of a child pedaling a bicycle to his school on top of a hill. He prayed over that picture for bicycles for children to go to school in India. The reason he thought was that children are living

in villages very far from the places where the schools are. Not long after little Noah's prayer, we heard news that in Tamil Nadu the Govt., provided bicycles for girl students in the higher secondary classes. God answered this little boy's prayer by blessing a whole state!

Reaching children is important.

Half of the world population is below 18 years of age. Taking care of children, providing opportunities for education, leading them to the Lord, mentoring them in the Kingdom principles etc., are very much of value. Children are small but ministering to them is not a small task. I would encourage all those who are involved in any kind of ministry among children that your job is highly honored by God. Your labor may seem like a drop in the ocean but that toil makes a positive impact in those little lives around you. Also I would appeal to others to get involved, pray and support when God gives you an opportunity to do so.

LET US ASK FOR THE NATIONS

God's word encourages us to ask for the nations as our inheritance. And we ask not in vain. God's promise confirms that our requests will be granted. "Ask of me and I will make the nations your inheritance, the ends of the earth your possession". Psalms 2:8. It was so exciting to hear the reports of transformations from nations as a result of prayer, at the Window International Network Asia

Leadership Summit.

WIN- is an organization mobilizes prayer for the 10/40 window countries under the eminent leadership of Sister Beverly Pegeues. This is headquartered in Colorado Springs, USA.

Special prayer sessions for 10/40 window nations, reconciliations, inspiring messages, encouraging reports, training workshops on leadership are the highlights of the summit held in Chiang Mai, Thailand from 27th - 31st October, 2008. I could attend the conference as one of the Indian delegates.

New India Evangelistic Association, Kerala, has been partnering with WIN in mobilizing prayer in India over the past many

Prayer brings transformation to nations. God makes things happen when we pray with faith. It is our mandate to pray for religious freedom, economic stability, political integrity, safety of children and women, responsible youth etc., as a whole.

years for the 10/40 Window countries. They translated and distributed prayer calendars in Hindi, Malayalam and Tamil. Continuous, informed prayer had its impacting effect in these nations. There were only 3 known Christians in an Asian country in 1989. Now there are about 20,000 thousand people believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, in that developing nation. Prayer avails much more than we can ever imagine!

Prayer brings transformation to nations. God makes things happen when we pray with faith. It is our mandate to pray for religious freedom,

prosperity, economic stability, political integrity, safety of children and women, responsible youth etc., as a whole. When we pray wars cease and peace prevails. Pray with tears, with a sense of urgency and responsibility. Prayer is our right before God, our father. When God commands us to ask.. let us ask boldly..let us ask for nations!

The majority of the unreached people of our world live in the rectangular-shaped window, a belt that extends from West Africa across Asia, between 10 degrees and 40 degrees North of the equator. There are 68 countries in this region.

· Over 4 billion people live in the 10/40 Window

· 84% of the world's poor live here

· Approximately 1.3 billion have never heard the gospel even once

· Every major non-Christian religion is headquartered here

· Corruption, poverty, lawlessness and human rights violations run rampant in the 10/40 Window, which makes it a breeding ground for demonic activity

Due to earnest prayers of God's faithful people, God has been opening up doors in many nations in the region for the gospel to be preached through various media during recent years. But, continued prayer is necessary to bring God's miraculous intervention in all the nations in this region, which should be every believer's calling and commitment.

About the author: Ms. Delite Sam is working as Finance Officer, New India Evangelistic Association, Trivandrum, Kerala. She is also a gifted preacher and translator.

Jesus Christ's famous quotes from the Bible

SLAPPING ON ONE CHEEK

You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also.

GAINING THE WHOLE WORLD & LOSING SOUL

For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?

LOVING & BLESSING

YOUR ENEMIES

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven.

FEEDING THE POOR AND DESTITUTE

For I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked

and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.'

"Then the righteous will answer Him, saying, 'Lord, when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You drink? When did we see You a stranger and take You in, or naked and clothe You? Or when did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?'

Then He will answer them, saying, 'Assuredly, I say to you, inasmuch as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did

not do it to Me.

And these will go away into everlasting punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.

KNOWING THE TRUTH

And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free [Satyameva Jayate (Sanskrit) - let the truth prevail]

DARKNESS & LIGHT

Take heed therefore that the light which is in thee be not darkness

[Tamsa Ma Jyotirgamaya (Sanskrit) - from darkness to light]

- Selected.

Life in the letters: Uncovering creation truth in ancient cultures



By Ava Ford,
M.D.

The truth about origins—about the creation of the world and its implications—has increasingly become a topic of colorful conversation in many facets of our society, not the least of which are the pulpits of our churches. At a recent Sunday night church social, I sat down at a table where two men were discussing the pastor's talk that night regarding creation, evolution, and the Bible. Both men had earned doctorates, and while one remained a steadfast believer in young earth creation, based on the authority of Scripture, the other man ardently held to the theory of theistic evolution, convinced that the earth is billions of years old.

I remained silent during the conversation until our church's evangelist sat down wearing an unusual shirt—a gift he had received on his recent trip to China. The shirt had scribbles of various Chinese characters, most of them in disjointed, incomplete sentences.

As I began to translate for him, I honed in on two of the characters in particular: "life" and "believe." It struck me that these words had relevance to the creation account in Genesis, the very topic of the pastor's talk.

Ancient Insight on Faith and the Creator

Chinese script is expressed through ideographic pictures developed from the picture writings on ancient oracle bones—a kind of "hieroglyphic" of Chinese language. Therefore, each character can be broken down into component parts. For instance, the word for "life" is made up of "motion" plus "Lord," which reveals the ancient Chinese belief that the Lord is the maker of all

life. "Believe" is also comprised of two components: "person" plus "word," which means that placing trust in a word is considered an act of faith or believing. Simple, yet profound, especially when translated within a biblical context. The story of the Roman centurion in Luke 7:2-10 comes to mind; Jesus specifically remarked that this man's "belief" in His Word was greater than what He could find in Israel.

According to research found in Harvard's Yenching Library, the written Chinese language may have originated as far back as 2500 B.C., which coincides closely with the estimated time of the great dispersion of humanity from Babel, as calculated from the biblical genealogies. When all mankind was divided into new linguistic groups and scattered over the face of the earth, ancient Chinese people would have also carried

with them an accurate account of early human history. Their knowledge of creation and the great Flood had to be fresh in their minds since they were likely contemporaries of Noah, who lived for 350 years after the Flood (Genesis 9:28) and knew all the details of creation through his own father, Lamech, who was only 56 years old when Adam died. With life spans averaging about 912 years in that era, he would have been considered a relatively young man (Genesis 5:1-11).

Interestingly, the ancient Chinese record *Feng-su T'ung-yi* (Comprehensive Meaning of Customs) states that all people on earth are descended from "Nu-wa." (Some have suggested

Many scholars suggested parallels with the early chapters of Genesis, shedding new light on the credibility of the Bible. Names of biblical patriarchs were recorded, as well as a "creation hymn." I found through other books on fossils, geology, astronomy, history, ancient languages, and medicine, much more evidence I could not simply brush aside—evidence that substantiated the veracity of Genesis

this to be a version of the biblical name Noah, as found in other ancient Chinese texts.) The Chinese were known for meticulous recordkeeping from the time of the Hsia dynasty in 2205 B.C., and according to their most acclaimed set of ancient manuscripts, *Shu Jing* (The Book of History), many generations of Chinese emperors recited texts of praise during the annual Border Sacrifice as they brought their people together to worship "Heavenly Sovereign Shangdi," the Creator of the universe and the one true God.

Of old in the beginning, there was the great chaos, without form and dark. The five elements (planets) had not begun to revolve, nor the sun and the moon to shine. In the midst thereof there existed neither forms nor sound. Thou, O spiritual Sovereign, camest forth in Thy presidency, and first didst divide the grosser parts from the purer. Thou madest heaven; Thou

madest earth; Thou madest man. All things with their reproducing power got their being.

Sounds remarkably similar to Genesis, doesn't it?

Acknowledging the Creator through Science

When you look at our beautiful planet earth, the changing colors in its seasons, and all its diverse, complex, interdependent creatures sustained by sophisticated ecosystems, have you ever stopped to wonder how it all came to be? Who set it all in motion and why?

Growing up in an unbelieving home, I was quite ignorant of the concept of God as Creator. In school I was only taught Charles Darwin's theory of evolution: that all life forms evolved from a single cell. However, when I entered medical school, and particularly during anatomy class, I began to seriously question its validity. Each day I encountered the intricacies of the human body and something within me demanded an honest appraisal of Darwin's theory. I really wanted to know the true account of man's beginning. But none of my professors could give satisfactory answers to my questions.

I got my first glimpse of the Genesis account during a grueling 10-day mountain climbing expedition through a region called the "valley of death." At one point during the climb, we were forced to spend a night in a cave because of a heavy rainstorm. In that cave, one of my teammates introduced me to the book of Genesis and the God of the Bible.

It wasn't until months later when I began to attend a Bible study with this same student that I heard the full story of the creation of the universe, the first man and woman, the institution of marriage, the temptation and fall, death as the consequence of sin, God's worldwide judgment through the Flood, the tower of Babel and the subsequent dispersion of humans through the confusion of many languages. As I studied, my excitement in the Bible grew. Not surprisingly, most of my classmates at medical school laughed at my enthusiasm for

these new discoveries, which they considered to be no more than fairy tales suited for children, not for scientifically-minded, educated people.

So I began to search for evidences outside the Bible, mainly through books on archaeology. I recall at this time in the late '70s that the media was buzzing about the cuneiform discoveries at Tel Mardikh (Ebla), on clay tablets dating back to 2250 B.C. Many scholars suggested parallels with the early chapters of Genesis, shedding new light on the credibility of the Bible. Names of biblical patriarchs were recorded, as well as a "creation hymn." I found through other books on fossils, geology, astronomy, history, ancient languages, and medicine, much more evidence I could not simply brush aside—evidence that substantiated the veracity of Genesis, which led me to place my trust in the authority of God's Word, to "believe" the Bible accounts from Genesis through Revelation as literal truth. In time, by God's grace, this confidence in the Scriptures led me to personal faith in the Lord Jesus.

Critics of the Creator

There are, I know, many well-meaning and well-educated Christians today who struggle with belief in the Genesis record. Sadly, they have placed more trust in science—in the words of men—than in Scripture. To these critics of the Creator I would ask if they consider themselves more qualified than the patriarch Job to answer the hard questions of God (Job 38-42). With all his wisdom, Job could only reply, "What shall I answer thee? I will lay mine hand upon my mouth" (Job 40:4).

It is both dangerous and dishonoring to God when His own people attempt to "spiritualize" the Scriptures in order to make them fit the musings of men (Job 36:26; 37:1-24). Science and its resultant evidence are vital for the progress of our God-given stewardship of the earth, but these must never be placed over the authority of God.

"Life" does not come through faith in the science of men, but through "belief" in the Creator of life, Jesus Christ.

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United Christian Fasting & Prayer 2009 at Allahabad

Allahabad: The Church in Allahabad is joining hearts together to pray and bless our nation of India. A team, namely, "TRANSFORMATION", will visit 612 districts of India and intercede for the nation in the coming days. The objective of this effort is to pray for unity among churches in India, to receive holiness, love, unity, forgiveness

and compassion in the body of Christ and India's evangelization.

In order to bless and send the "TRANSFORMATION" team for this purpose, all the congregations in Allahabad are gathering together at Allahabad Bible Seminary Campus for a three day fasting and prayer from 12 to 14 February, 2009

from 10:30 am to 4:0 pm. Sqdn. Ldr. Mohan Philip will grace this occasion as the chief guest.

The team urge all the Christian leaders along with their congregation to stand with them in order to make this event a great success and blessing for nation and bring glory to our God.

Shameful order

Bangalore (Karnataka): The state government issued an order which can be described only as shameful in modern India. It directed the temples in the state to conduct special poojas to ward off the 'inauspicious' occasion of a partial solar eclipse on January 26, 2009. The temples were given an allowance of Rs.8,000 each.

It is a fact that most Indians are superstitious, and observe or undertake many rituals. But it is really a shame on the part of a state government of a secular and scientifically advanced country who successfully landed a moon module on November 14, 2008, to issue such orders.

Christian rule of Australia asserted

Canberra: Prime Minister John Howard declared that Muslims who want to live under Islamic Sharia law were should get out of Australia, as the government targeted radicals in a bid to head off potential terror attacks.

Separately, Howard angered some Australian Muslims by saying he supported spy agencies monitoring the nation's mosques.

Quote: 'IMMIGRANTS, NOT AUSTRALIANS, MUST ADAPT. Take It Or Leave It. I am tired of this nation worrying about whether we are offending some individual or their culture. Since the terrorist attacks on Bali, we have experienced a surge in patriotism by the majority of Australians.'

'This culture has been developed over two centuries of struggles, trials and victories by millions of men and women who have sought freedom'

'We speak mainly ENGLISH, not Spanish, Lebanese, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Russian, or any other language. Therefore, if you wish to become part of our society. Learn the language!'

'Most Australians believe in God. This is not some Christian, right wing, politics, but a fact, because Christian men and women, on Christian principles, founded this nation, and this is clearly documented. It is certainly appropriate to display it on the walls of our schools. If God offends you, then I suggest you consider another part of the world as your new home, because God is part of our culture.'

'We will accept your beliefs, and will not question why. All we ask is that you accept ours, and live in harmony and peaceful enjoyment with us. This is OUR COUNTRY, OUR LAND, and OUR LIFESTYLE, and we will allow you every opportunity to enjoy all this. But once you are done complaining, whining, and griping about Our Flag, Our Pledge, Our Christian beliefs, or Our Way of Life, I highly encourage you take advantage of one other great Australian freedom, 'THE RIGHT TO LEAVE'.'

'If you aren't happy here then LEAVE. We didn't force you to come here. You asked to be here. So accept the country YOU accepted.'

Offering for rebuilding churches

Bangalore (Karnataka): The Full Gospel Assembly of God Church, ministered by Pastor Paul Thangiah, has collected a record offering for rebuilding churches destroyed during the anti-Christian violence in the state.

Whenever the pastor calls for a special offering, he identifies a day, then he goes on fast and praying for a miracle. Everytime, the offering used to be more than double his target. This offering was 72 lakhs (Rs 72,00,000) against his target of 25 Lakhs. He plans to build churches in Davengere, Chicmagalur, etc. He plans to build 27

churches in legally purchased lands for those Pastors whose churches were destroyed.

FGAG's 65% collection is given out. It has already built a lot many churches in SAARC countries, specially Sri Lanka, Nepal, etc., and gives to the pastors there (they are not FGAG branch churches). Once the churches are built, Pastor Paul or associate pastors of FGAG go for dedication. The dedication of the church thus constructed is shown on LCD to the church believers so the congregation knows where their money has gone.

Christians acquitted

Islamabad (Pakistan): Finally some relief for the oppressed Christians here. Five Pakistani Christians who were falsely accused of blasphemy in April 2007 and had been detained in prison, were recently acquitted of the charges, according to reports.

The district judge acquitted Salamat Masih (42), his son Rashid (16), and their three relatives on January 13, 2009 after the Muslim witnesses withdrew their testimony.

The acquittal comes as a result of out of court meetings held between Muslim leaders and a representative of the Christian organization Sharing Life Ministries Pakistan.

In these meetings, the Christian representative was able to convince the Muslim leaders that the alleged blasphemy claims grew from a misunderstanding, prompting the Muslims to issue a religious edict declaring the innocence of the believers.

Cornelius the gentle: A truth seeker.



By Pastor V.N. Chellappan



The God of heaven searches the hearts of men with His eyes - a flame of fire. His eyes see everything everywhere. Nothing is hid from His flaming eyes. He is the Omnipotent, Omniscient and Omnipresent God of the universe, the creator of everything on the earth.

Everyone, except a few atheists and mad people on earth believe that there is some (Supernatural) power behind every creation. Like, a potter behind a pot; a person and a pen behind a letter; an Engineer behind an engine; a hen behind an egg, etc.

Evolution brings nothing of its own. It is utter foolishness. However, evolutionists do not deny the first cause. Their theory begins with substance of matter already in existence. They believe in primitive nebosity and powers possessed by molecules, but do not account for how these came into existence; how molecules have its inherent powers, etc.

Darwin, one of the evolutionists taught that the more complex organs and instincts have been perfected by the accumulation of innumerable slight variations, each good for the individual possessor. It is all nonsense; but the pathetic thing is that they glibly deny the existence of God and His work in creation.

Let us pray that such people may come to their senses and accept the parenthood of their parents some day! Anyway, God is at His workshop and does everything so beautiful. He recognises those who diligently search for Him. He is like a potter who recognises His own hand-crafted pots, both from its inward and outward conditions. Man sees only from outside but God looks deep into the inner side of every individual. He loves all His creations equally and more so towards the crowning jewel of His creation - man. God did not create any religion or caste, but formed man in His own image and likeness out of the dust of the ground. The body was formed by the soul and spirit (inner man) was created.

The religions caste and region are the foolish brainchildren of man. The Holy Bible tells us that the religion and its rituals are the first and foremost cause of hatred, strife and murder on the earth. With wisdom what I understand is that the so called 'religious Christianity' is the creation of

the world but the true Christianity is an explicit personal experience with Christ which the world can hardly understand.

In today's world these three things, the religion, caste and region play a great role in destruction and co-existence. God created the earth for habitation of man, not for strife or murder. Such heinous crimes never occurred in the mind of God during creation. God looked at all His creations, and behold it was very good. The Bible teaches us that God is Spirit and therefore those who worship Him must do so in Spirit and in truth.

And what is Spirit and what is truth? Spirit is the "promise" of Christ which He promptly sent on the day of Pentecost, and Jesus said: I am the way, the truth and the life. Thus Jesus is the truth; so the way to the Father (Heaven) for life eternal is possible only through Jesus. Jesus exhorted His disciples saying: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free" from the snares of the world and also from the bondage of Satan.

Many people think what they got or acquired from their forefathers and from tradition are the truth. They thus hold on to traditions without further question. No one bothers to think for the salvation of their souls. Many take it for granted that heaven and hell are here in this life, according to the works of everyone - for good works good reward and for bad works bad reward!

Moreover, most people have no time to spare for spiritual activities, but busy in their own business to accumulate riches and finally fade away to their own doom. Many who acquire riches by hook or crook do not realise that their accumulated riches would be squandered by their own future generations. They do not know that wealth have wings that it flies away. Many hang on to their own convictions in their traditions.

However, the Bible tells us about a person named Cornelius who was one of the captains of the Italian army. The gentleman was a gentile and an earnest seeker of truth. He lived among the Jews and was aware of their laws and way of worship. That knowledge did not make any differ-

ence with his own traditional rituals and worship. Although he was in a responsible position and had tight duty schedules, he remained a god-fearing man. The New Testament records that "he was a devout man and one that feared God with all his house, which gave much alms to the people and prayed to God always." (Acts 10:2).

For Cornelius, his duty and responsibilities never deterred him from personal relationship with God. He always prayed to God - a point to ponder for us. Being a gentile what or who he prayed is not what matters, but his personal relationship with God that matters. Being a gentile he must have been a traditional idol worshipper. His earnest desire coupled with innocence for the 'supernatural' paved the way for the supernatural to intervene for the salvation of Cornelius and his god-fearing family.

God is one and is universal. He has created man and woman with the intention that they multiply and increase and remain ever with God in eternity. It is sin that separated man

It tells us that God has no religious favouritism or nepotism in choosing people for Himself. God's promise to every truth seeker is that "I will never leave you nor forsake you." It is worth believing. And it may also be noted that being devout, pious or dutiful to religion will not save the soul of a person.

from God. A holy God can't be expected to move or mingle with sinful man. Thus the gulf between man and God. The Creator has the authority over His creations and therefore set certain conditions for man to observe.

Disobedience (sin) had brought curse upon the earth. A product of the curse could not remove the sin of man. Therefore, it was necessitated that God Himself take the form of man through a virgin who had 'not known' a man. The birth of Jesus was announced to virgin Mary by a holy angel saying: "The Holy Ghost shall come upon you and the power of the Highest shall overshadow you, therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of you shall be called the Son of God (Luke 1:35).

Any and every human being born on earth is a sinner, for he is born on to the cursed earth. Therefore a sinful man/ woman or any image of anything of the earth or beneath the earth cannot remit the sins of the human race. A sinless and holy product of

heaven only could save a sinner and that is why Jesus was to become a ransom for the sinful human race. So what was required to be done for the remission of sins has already been 'done' by Christ on the cross. Still hanging on the cross between heaven and the earth, Jesus declared: "It is finished." It means that the very purpose for which Christ came to the earth has been accomplished and therefore there is no need for any more sacrifices for remission of sins of the people.

The Bible declares: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son that whosoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life." (John 2:16). It further states in the Book of Acts: "Neither is there salvation in any other for there is none other name (other than the name of Jesus Christ) under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved." (John 4:12).

Unfortunately poor Cornelius was unaware of this scripture portion - the truth - and therefore he continued to worship the traditional way.

The merciful God who discerns everything had discerned the mind of Cornelius., the devout man, and decided to intervene so as to save him and his household.

You may ask, why not others also? It is God's discretion and we have no right to question. However, he had saved me, a great sinner and may like to save you too, for who knows the heart of God! It tells us that God has no religious favouritism or nepotism in choosing

people for Himself. God's promise to every truth seeker is that "I will never leave you nor forsake you." It is worth believing. And it may also be noted that being devout, pious or dutiful to religion will not save the soul of a person. Even so God fearing, giving much alms, praying always being just in the eyes of men or having good reputations in society and much fasting etc. will also not save one's soul.

If these above mentioned works were sufficient for salvation of soul, then even demons and sinners who fear God would also be saved. In such an event God's intervention in the case of Cornelius and millions of others and the sufferings of Jesus on the cross would be in vain or would have been unnecessary! God is always merciful and compassionate and do not wish any soul to be lost; for He says "I have no pleasure in death of sinners." Every soul is precious in God's sight.

(To be continued in the next issue of Praise the Almighty)

The Great Kerala Debate on Jewellery

(contd. from page 9)

example, Acts 3:6 does not have anything to do with jewellery. Peter and John were just saying that they did not have any money (coins) to offer to the beggar. Instead they had something that would help the beggar to stand on his own feet (literally too!) and to make money for himself! Similarly, the “gold or silver” mentioned in 1 Peter 1:18 too refers to money. God did not redeem us by paying money as ransom as was done in those days (and even today, to gain release of hostages).

A verse from the Parable of the Prodigal Son is also widely misused for defending the use of jewellery (See Luke 15:22). It is just a parable. The mention of a father asking for a ring for his son has no instructional value for Christians today. Jesus did not say: “Go and get yourself a ring because the prodigal son was given one.” A similar passage is Psalm 45:9. That too is a description of Solomon’s bride and her attire; it is not an instruction or exhortation.

Jacob instructed his family to get rid of all idols (Genesis 35:2). One of his wives had stolen her father’s idols. Jacob wanted his entire family to get ready to worship the One True God. As a part of the preparation, he wanted them to bathe and change their clothes. His family handed over to him all their idols and earrings. Why earrings? Obviously, these too were contaminated by idolatry in some way or the other. This passage does not suggest that Jacob’s family got rid of all their jewellery. Therefore it is foolish to use this passage to strengthen the Kerala Pentecostal argument to force renunciation of jewellery on all who wish to be a part of the Church.

Let me turn to the verses that have some bearing on the church today. The first of these is 1 Timothy 2:8ff which demands a certain kind of behaviour from men *and* women. Men are supposed avoid all anger and quarrelling in order to be able pray in a way acceptable to God. Women should not strive to draw attention to themselves through outward decorations such as exotic hair arrangements, gold jewellery, pearls or expensive clothes.

And I want women to be modest in their appearance. They should wear decent and appropriate clothing and **not draw attention to themselves** by the way they fix their hair or by wearing gold or pearls or expensive clothes. For women who claim to be devoted to God should **make themselves attractive by the good things they do.** (v. 9, 10)

The key thing in this verse 9 is not “gold” or “pearls” or “expensive clothes.” **The key thing is that women should not work hard to**

make heads turn to themselves.

Whatever a woman does with an intention to make heads turn or to catch someone’s attention is sinful.

(Now, for that matter, this applies for men too!)

This instruction in Scripture does not mean that a woman should let her hair remain in a dishevelled state. They have to fix their hair in a way that is suited to them. It is “**the way they fix their hair**” that matters. Paul does not prescribe a particular style of hairdo for Christian women. He gives Christian women the freedom to decide the details! He leaves it to their conscience. Each woman should ask herself, “Am I overdoing my hair to stand out in a crowd and thus to attract attention to myself?”

Similarly, the restriction on “**gold or pearls**” is NOT a ban on jewellery! Unfortunately, Pentecostals of Kerala do not know how to differentiate between **gold and jewellery**. They are unable to think of jewellery other than jewellery made of gold. When this passage was written, that is, in the first century, people wore jewellery made of several materials – gold, silver, wood, animal bones including ivory, precious stones, pearls, etc. Of these, the costliest must have been jewellery made of gold or pearls.

Paul did not want godly women to have lopsided priorities—to spend their hard earned money on the costliest of jewellery. Instead, he advised Christian women to decorate themselves with good works. Strange enough, we do not hear much about this aspect in Kerala. Women do not receive much encouragement to do anything let alone good works. The negative is emphasized and stretched beyond its dimensions while the positive is left out! Paul’s command to Christian women to “**make themselves attractive by the good things they do**” does not mean that godly women should remain outwardly unattractive. All godly people must bring glory to God by their personal cleanliness and tasteful appearance. Dressing “**up**” for the glory of God is a sacred duty. Dressing “**down**” is certainly not a mark of godliness. In India, the land of many religions that glorify

asceticism, it is easy to be caught up by teachings that glorify the practice of religious “dressing down.”

Unfortunately, Pentecostals of Kerala do not know how to differentiate between **gold and jewellery**. They are unable to think of jewellery other than jewellery made of gold. When this passage was written, that is, in the first century, people wore jewellery made of several materials – gold, silver, wood, animal bones including ivory, precious stones, pearls, etc.

Paul’s instruction to avoid “**expensive clothes**” is obviously not a ban on clothes! He just wants godly people to avoid spending a fortune on clothes. What is expensive is indeed a subjective matter. What is expensive and luxurious for an ordinary person may be an item of necessity for another. Here too, Paul leaves a lot of room for people to decide for themselves. (It may be profitable here to mention that the cost of clothing is not the amount of money that you spend on a dress. The actual cost of an

item you wear is the amount spent on it divided by the number of times you wore it. Thus, a cheap shirt that lasted just for three months is more expensive than a costly shirt that lasts for three years.) More than the cost of a dress, or a piece of jewellery, or a pair of shoes, it is the **owner’s intention** that matters before God.

I must mention here that the Pentecostal community of Kerala is very unfair to women in many ways.

The men who travel abroad or appear for interviews spend a lot of money on expensive suits, ties and footwear especially as a part of their career strategy. The women, on the other hand, are not allowed to look as attractive as their competitors in the job market.

Paul asks the men to avoid anger and quarrelling (1 Timothy 2:8). However, this is not seen as a condition for baptism or for partaking in the Lord’s Table. No Malayali pastor has ever told a man, “Get rid of your anger and then I will baptize you.” We see church leaders who take pride in their short temper and rush off to court to sue their brothers in Christ! However, these leaders misinterpret verse 9 and prohibit women (it’s mostly women who wish to wear jewellery) from taking baptism with their jewellery.

It should also be mentioned that there are Pentecostal women who crave after expensive and extravagant clothes even after renouncing jewellery. And there are Pentecostal

men and women in Kerala who wear expensive golden watches and still discriminate against foreigners who wear a wedding ring.

If we understand 1 Timothy 2:8-9 in the proper way, it is easy to understand 1 Peter 3:3-4:

Do not let your adornment be *merely* outward — arranging the hair, wearing gold, or putting on *fine* apparel — rather *let it be* the hidden person of the heart, with the incorruptible *beauty* of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is very precious in the sight of God. (NKJV)

It is obvious that Peter is not instructing Christian women (whose husbands are yet to believe) to shun clothing or apparel. His focus too, like Apostle Paul’s, is on extravagance and overspending on outward adornment. It is not clothes that we should avoid; we need to shun **expensive clothes**. Similarly, it is not jewellery that we should shun; we must shun the **costliest** of jewellery—whether it is gold or pearls or platinum. The most expensive jewellery of modern times is not gold or pearls; they are made of platinum and diamonds.

A Christian woman may arrange her hair nicely; she is allowed to wear modest jewellery and appropriate clothes. However, she shouldn’t be noticed for these outward adornments. She should get distinguished by the overwhelming charm of her inner beauty—that of a gentle and quite spirit. The ungodly world today does not appreciate or highlight the need for gentle and quite women! They want women to be **loud and bold** (read ‘shameless’). **Bold** clothes are clothes that reveal more of your skin! I don’t understand why people need **boldness** to be naked or scantily dressed! They want women to shout and fight for their rights!

Conclusion

The Bible does not prohibit the use of jewellery. The use of jewellery is not a valid ground for the denial of baptism or fellowship at the Lord’s Table. People who deny water baptism on the grounds of jewellery or exclude genuine believers from the Lord’s Table are guilty of desecrating the Church’s ordinances and of abuse of authority. The Bible does not want men to argue and fight – whether it is about women’s jewellery or about other matters. At the same time, the Bible wants women to be modest – in clothing, jewellery and hair arrangement. They should not strive to get undue attention from others by going for the most attractive clothes and expensive jewellery. Godly women must focus on decorating themselves with good works of charity and in cultivating a gentle and quite spirit.

Q & A

Question & Answer Time!

By 'Apollos'

Q: Although I am a Christian, I live in fear. I am scared of attacks from the devil. This was aggravated after I read books such as "He came to set the Captives Free" and other books by Rebecca Brown. In fact, I am more conscious of the attacks and schemes of the enemy than of God's presence and comfort. My church too teaches a lot about spiritual warfare and about binding the devil. I have tried to rebuke and bind the devil so that his forces in my area can be defeated. Please help me.

A: I am glad that you have gathered the courage and honesty to admit that you are living in fear. I am also glad that you see an inconsistency between your identity as a Christian and your life in fear. There are ever so many Christians who take fear of the evil forces as a part of normal Christian life! And those who don't, have no courage to admit that they are living an abnormal "Christian" life ruled by fear. At the onset, let me request you to read my reply carefully, with a Bible at your side. Please turn to the references given below and check them up to your satisfaction. Make a note of them so that you will have these references long after this paper is gone!

First of all, let me assure you, that it is not your duty as a Christian to "bind" the devil. No man has been entrusted with that task. The Lord Jesus Christ taught his disciples that he has already bound the "strong man" - the devil (Matt. 12:29). That was how he could cast out demons from people and start plundering the devil's kingdom. When you understand what Jesus has done for you, you will be relieved. As Jesus said, You shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free!

Secondly, you need not "defeat" the devil or his forces! No Christian is ever charged to do that. Jesus Christ has already defeated the devil and his armies. The devil is no more the ruler of this world; he was ousted from his position by none other than Jesus (John 12:31). (If there are people still under his sway, it is because of their ignorance about the gospel or their unwillingness to obey the gospel.) The devil's power was destroyed (Heb. 2:14) and his "head" (authority) was crushed (Gen. 3:15). Thus, the devil is a defeated enemy. He was disarmed by Christ's atoning work on

the cross and was made a public spectacle (Col. 2:15). And the devil and his minions are condemned to endure an eternal hell (Matt. 25:41). Christ, on the other hand, was exalted to the right hand of God's throne. "Right hand" signifies power. Jesus was made the Lord—the King of kings and Lord of Lords (Acts 2:33-36). He is not just a mediator, as some erroneously believe. The promise given to David, that his descendant would be enthroned forever, was fulfilled in Jesus at his glorification (Acts 13:32-33). Jesus was exalted above every rule, authority, power and dominion (Eph. 2:21). So, Jesus is in power as the most exalted Messiah, the anointed King! A person who does not believe this cannot be saved because it is this confession - that 'Jesus is Lord' - that saves us (Rom 10:9-10). People who say that Jesus is not yet King should do some serious introspection about the validity of their faith.

And you, as a Christian are seated with Christ, above all forces of darkness (Eph. 2:6). Why then should you be afraid if you believe what the Bible says? Can the devil snatch you out of Jesus' hands? No! (John 10:27-29). Can he touch your body or your possessions without God's express permission? No! (Job 1:10). Although the devil is defeated, bound, and dethroned, he is potent enough to attack the Church and Christians in many small ways. He tempts people to commit sin, he steals God's word from people's hearts (Mk 4:15); he may accuse you before God (that's why he is called Satan, the accuser); he may tempt you to be proud (1 Tim 3:6); he might bring in false teachings into the church (1 Tim. 4:1-5); he could hinder the travel plans of God's servants and thus cause hurdles in the way of the gospel (1 Thess. 2:18); he could exploit sorrow or discouragement in a Christian to get the better of him/her (2 Cor. 2:6,7,11); and he can "blind" the eyes of unbelievers so that they don't see the gospel's light (Of course, when God opens someones inner eyes, he/she will see the gospel 2 Cor 4:4-6).

In all his teaching about spiritual warfare, Paul never once said that we should be afraid of the devil's attacks. It is true that no Christian can withstand the attack of this

defeated enemy on his/her own. Even though these attacks are limited in one way or the other, we are commanded to trust in God's power and to take up God's full armour (Eph. 6:10ff). No soldier runs with the "full armour" on him. Wearing it is a defensive strategy.

We get so caught up with the metaphorical language of "armour" that is used here that we get distracted from the real meaning of the "armour." The "full armour" is **a set of virtues**—truth, righteousness, faith, correct use of the Word of God, readiness to preach the gospel, and the hope of salvation! These are powerful enough to resist the devil's schemes. This is why Christian character formation - growing into a Christ-like nature - is so important in spiritual warfare. We are not given "techniques" and "*mantras*" for victory. We are asked to become like Christ in our conduct - in honesty, righteous living, in endurance that comes from hope, in readiness to share the gospel, in exercising unwavering faith in God's promises, and in using the Word correctly. Jesus used the Word correctly, in defense, when tempted by the devil.

Remember, we are not called to attack the devil or to go after him or even to engage in a conversation with him. We are told to resist, to stand firm and to hold the ground. If we resist, he will flee. Any attempt to attack, to revile, to curse, or to rebuke the devil is contrary to Scriptural teaching and is unnecessary (Jude v. 8-10; 2 Peter 2:10-12). Jesus commanded his disciples to cast out evil spirits. That just takes a command and is different from actual rebuking or reviling.

Another thing to be noted here is that prayer is not a part of the armour even though there is a mention about prayer in Ephesians 6. I have seen several Christians using prayer as a "weapon" directly against the devil! They address the devil directly as they try to name his spirits and to bind them! Prayer - whether in your own language or in a Spirit-given language - must be addressed God. The right posture for prayer is an attitude of supplication and NOT an attitude of pride. Prayer is not "ordering" God about - to do things our way and at our time. When we pray according to God's will, God will work against the devil's schemes.

That's where the action against the devil comes from.

There are a number of books such as the ones that you mentioned that deal with spiritual warfare. However, not all of them are based on the Scriptures. It is sad that we get easily swept away by any thing in print—even when it is contrary to explicit biblical teaching. In the area of spiritual warfare this is very true. Christian leaders too mislead people by borrowing "warfare techniques" from the world of animism and magic. Sometimes, they do it inadvertently. In any case, it confuses people and deprives them of the victory that Christ's work has accomplished for them.

In this connection, I would like to take note of one of the phrases you employed—"his (devil's) forces in my area". Recently, American scholars such as Peter Wagner and other scholars from Fuller have endorsed the ancient animistic view that there are "territorial spirits" in this world. According to this belief - which lacks Scriptural validity - there are evil spirits that control cities, villages, and entire countries. I think your reference to the devil's forces in your "area" is influenced by this teaching. Limitations of space will not allow me to fully deal with this topic here. Practises such as prayer-walks, spiritual mapping, naming of evil spirits to bind them, etc. are based on this erroneous teaching about territorial spirits. There are so many well-meaning, sincere Christians in India who lap up every new teaching that appears in print or on TV.

I would say just this: God has not appointed evil spirits to rule over territories. Jesus made it very clear. He said, "All authority in heaven and on earth is given to me." I do not know of any Bible passage that says that Jesus has delegated his authority on earth to sub-contractors - to evil spirits - to rule smaller territories! For a fuller argument against this heresy called "Strategic Level Spiritual Warfare" that teaches about "territorial spirits", read Chuck Lowe's *Territorial Spirits and World Evangelisation?* published by OM Books, Secunderabad (Originally published by Christian Focus Publications, Great Britain).

Send in your questions to ppe@praisethealmighty.com to get Biblical answers in this column.



By Dr. Blesson C.S.

Seek and you will find

When young and old ask and seek sincerely, Truth is revealed as Bible says 'Seek and you will find'. God is not far away from anyone who seeks Him with honesty and with a sincere heart.



Once, a friend of my roommate came to our room for a visit from another town. My roommate introduced me and told him that I was a Christian. I shook his hands and said 'hallo'. He looked at me rather strangely and curiously and asked 'Kitna mila?' (How much did you get?). I was a little puzzled and thought that maybe I did not hear him properly

prestigious institutions in India. It was during this time that Deepa started thinking about God and started searching for the TRUE GOD. All possibilities were open in front of her. Are all gods the same? Am I worshipping the real god? Can there be several gods? As these questions grew louder and louder in her mind, she was struggling to

me that this is our God? Is this decided by my parents? What is my part in this decision? Thankfully, I made a decision to follow Christ and found a reason to follow Him, not just because my parents told me to. I lost all touch with this friend of mine for more than a decade and very recently I found him through a community website. Now, he is well educated and is working for a good company in Europe.

Christ believer. Slowly I told my parents. They could not say anything because I am not doing anything wrong, other than following Christ. So it happened just like that'. Can anyone ask Ganesh 'Kitna mila?'

When Anand Mahadevan, Syed Hadeed, Rajiv Menon, Salma Ali, Jaya Ramamurthy, Prabhu Guptara, Anil Kant and several countless others accepted Christ as their Lord and God, Can you ask them 'Kitna mila?' When young and old ask and seek sincerely, Truth is revealed as Bible says 'Seek and you will find'. God is not far away from anyone who seeks Him with honesty with a sincere heart. May be in one sense you can ask them 'Kitna mila?' They would be happy to say... not in terms of money but in terms of peace, joy, hope, freedom and eternal life.

This time again, he made me think! I saw lots of gospel videos and Bible verses all over his profile! I was wondering is this the same long lost friend of mine? I asked him what made him change his mind. So he

They are purchased not by Church but by CHRIST and not by dollars but by His own BLOOD! Seek Him and you will find Him...CHALLENGE!



A column for Youngsters

and asked him what he meant. He asked me 'How much did they pay you to lure you into Christianity?' Even before I could open my mouth to reply, my roommate promptly interfered saying 'He is an original Christian' and took him away. This incident made me think, how many people are led to believe by several fanatical groups using their propaganda saying that people are purchased by the Church.

find the truth. A friend invited her to a church. Her life was transformed ever since! She was convinced that there could be only one God and it was Jesus Christ and started following Him. Can anyone ask this brilliant girl 'Kitna mila?'

She was an extraordinarily brilliant student. She hailed from a traditional family who were the custodians of temples. Their family had been involved in several rituals for centuries over several generations. They were not poor by any means. She grew up endorsing the family traditions and zealously following it. Then, she came over to another city to do her doctoral studies in one of the

He was my classmate during my school days. We played and studied together. He was from a very decent family and his father was a successful businessman. I vividly remember once he told me 'your Mom told you these are stones so for you these are stones but my Mom told me that these are my gods and so for me, they are gods'. As a school student this made me ask questions after questions. Am I following Christ just because my parents told

May be in one sense you can ask them 'Kitna mila? They would be happy to say... not in terms of money but in terms of peace, joy, hope, freedom and eternal life. They are purchased not by Church but by CHRIST and not by dollars but by His own BLOOD!

told me... 'I was feeling very lonely, during that time I started reading Bible. I started becoming very humble and honest with God. There was huge fight between me and God for several years. Finally, I told him to prove that He is my only God and He did so. Then, I gave up my other faith and now I am a

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Taking positive positive

Through blossoming buds, we are providing a forum for budding writers to express their talents. The young writer in this issue is Miss. Grace George, a student in New Delhi.



By Miss. Grace George

"Find your gift and use it, the experts say. If you have a gift, take that advice. Don't bury your talent. But, this advice could be an excuse for some folk to settle back in their armchairs. They will profess that they have no gift.

The Bible has a better way: "Whatever you hand finds to do, do it with your might" (Eccl. 9:10). I take this to mean: get into God's vineyard and leave no stone unturned.

Survey what has to be done, and get on with it. In some cases, the call of God is the need. If you look at whether you are gifted for a task or not, you might decide it doesn't lie within your province. You may leave it to someone else. It is the call of God and what needs to be done that matters.

We should not consult with ourselves about our gifts, for by faith God can lift us beyond ourselves and our limitations. It isn't you who does the work. It's God. Without Him, you can do nothing anyway. But you can do all things through Christ. We can walk on the water if we need be, for all things are possible to him that believes.

Faith in God makes the person! What we believe, we are. Don't undersell to yourself. Selling yourself short is not humility, but a denial of the very purpose for which you were born. What does God want you to do? The first thing He wants you to do is not to spend years finding out what He wants. God keeps no one waiting for that long. If He wants a job done, there would be no point in keeping us guessing about it. Why should He do that? It would be ridiculous to hide from you what His purposes are for you. Nor will He make it terribly difficult for you to find out. Here is a vital principle - the call of God must be obeyed if you want the power of God to work through you.

He always has a task at hand. It may not be a great task - it may be nothing heroic. Perhaps it is a job that you think is beneath your dignity, even one that could be considered menial. Remember that the great Apostle Paul sat making tents - not planning in tents. Faithful in the little things, God made him master of much. Some are asking God to speak and guide them because they despise the day of small beginnings. They assume God has some great work for them and that it surely cannot be a little thing. "And do you seek great things for yourself? Do not seek them," said God through Jeremiah to his secretary/ servant (Jer.45:5). You can't steer a boat or bicycle that is not moving. God waits for you to move before He tells you which direction to take.

God does guide us. This is a divine principle. You take the initiative for God. That is how Paul went on his famous travels.

TAKE ACTION

If there is a hole in the dam, plug it; don't pass a

resolution about it. If a foe is breaking into the Promised Land, the demand is obvious. Fight! Don't wait! Don't ask God what to do, or study whether you have the gift. Doing nothing because we can't do something mighty is nothing but pride.

THE INITIATIVE IS YOURS

Too often the people say that the time isn't right. As if whether or circumstances could thwart the power of God! Revival isn't for when there is revival, but for when there isn't any sign of it. Revivals always begin when nothing is happening. When there are no signs of God's moving and when there is seemingly nothing encouraging on the horizon. Precisely because things were bad all around, bold men and women of faith determined to change them. If we wait until the situation is better, we shall never go at all. In fact, what's the point then? We are all praying for a mighty revival to sweep India and the rest of the world. Pray on! But don't wait until it comes and gospel preaching then becomes easy. Get on with what you can do now. You can win thousands for Christ while waiting for revival. And not only that; your action could be the very start of revival.

It is true that revival is a sovereign act of God, as many believe. But it is equally true that revival can be caused. The early Christians certainly knew this, because Mark 16:20 declares: "And they went out..." In other words, they took the initiative, and the Lord gladly obliged! I am fully persuaded that God allows us to pull the trigger for mighty outpourings of His Holy Spirit. By His grace, I have witnessed it numerous times! We need Holy Spirit initiative! Revival takes anointed men and women of God who exercise the audacity of faith! Anybody can believe God is moving. Real faith acts when God doesn't seem to be moving! God loves the man and woman who gamble on His help! This is the formula for triumph, blessing and revival.

How many more people can you think of who did exactly that? Think of anybody who achieved new things for God. Everyone was somebody who dared when nobody else thought it was the time. Every revival was started this way.

Imagine this: Jesus is teaching in the Synagogue on the Sabbath. The cynics are there, watching Him. Another man is there, watching Him. This man has a withered hand. How much revival atmosphere could there be in this synagogue, with the critics waiting for a chance to accuse Jesus if he heals this man on the Sabbath? The conditions are hardly propitious. But Jesus heals the man - because the time is ripe when the need is greatest (Luke 6:6-11). And the time, I am sure, is today.

Who is God waiting for? Could it be you? I usually say to my friends that you don't need anybody to lay hand on you. You don't need any more prophecies. All you need to do is to obey the great commission. Don't waste any more time. My dear friends.. What are you waiting for? In this New Year do something good for God!! Take a decision today and stand for God. Let this whole year may be the most blessed and prosperous year for you! God bless you!!

The Bible

The Bible contains the mind of God,
The state of man, the way of salvation,
The doom of sinners,
And the happiness of believers.
Its doctrines are glory,
Its precepts
Are binding, its histories are true,
And its decisions are immutable.

Read it to be wise, believe it to be safe,
And practice it to be holy.
It contains light to direct you
Food to support to you,
And comfort to cheer you.
It's a traveler's map,
The pilgrim's staff, the pilot's compass,
The soldier's sword,
And the Christian's charter.

Here paradise is restored,
Heaven opened,
And the gate of hell disclosed.
CHRIST is its grand subject,
Our good design,
And the glory of God its end.
It should fill the memory,
Role the heart, and guide the feet.
Read it slowly, frequently, and prayerfully.

It is a mine of wealth, a paradise of glory,
And a river of pleasure.
It is given you in life,
Will be opened at the judgment.
And be remembered forever.
It involves the highest responsibility, will reward the greatest labor,
And will condemn all who trifle with its sacred contents.

Son of Hamas leader turns to Christ

By Jonathan Hunt

Mosab Hassan Yousef is an extraordinary young man with an extraordinary story. He was born the son of one of the most influential leaders of the militant Hamas organization in the West Bank and grew up in a strict Islamic family.

Now, at 30 years old, he attends an evangelical Christian church, Barabbas Road in San Diego, Calif. He renounced his Muslim faith, left his family behind in Ramallah and is seeking asylum in the United States. The story of how his life unfolded is truly amazing, whether you agree or disagree with his views. Below is a transcript on an exclusive FOX News interview with Hassan as he tells firsthand how a West Bank Muslim became a West Coast Christian.

JONATHAN HUNT: Why, after 25 years, did you change?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: I believe that all those walls that Islam built for the last 1,400 years are not existing (sic) anymore. They don't recognize this. They built those walls and made people ignorant because they're afraid. They didn't want people to discuss anything about the reality of Islam, about the big questions of Islam and they asked their followers, the Muslims, 'Don't ask about those certain questions.'

But now, people have media. If the father closes the door for his daughter not to leave the house, she's going to go behind her computer and travel the world. So people easily can get information, knowledge, searching (sic) engines, so it's very, very available for everybody to study about Islam, about other religions. Not from the Islam point of view, but from other points of view.

So for the next 25 years this is for sure going to make huge change in the Muslim and the Arab world.

JONATHAN HUNT: You speak from a unique perspective, a man who grew up not just in an Islamic family but as part of an organization seen by many people around the world as an extreme force in Islam: Hamas. What is the reality of Islam? You say people don't see the reality; What is the reality of Islam?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: There are two facts that Muslims don't understand ... I'd say about more than 95 percent of Muslims don't understand their own religion. It came with a much stronger language than the language that they speak so they don't understand it ... they rely only on religious people to get their knowledge about this religion.

Second, they don't understand anything about other religions. Christian communities live between Muslims and they're minority and they (would) rather not to go speak out and tell people about Jesus because it's dangerous for them.

So, all their ideas about other religions on earth are from Islamic perspectives. So those two realities, most people don't understand.

If people, if Muslims, start to understand their religion — first of all, their religion — and see how awful stuff is in there, they'll start to figure out, this can't (be) ... because most religious people focus on certain points of Islam. They have many points that they are very embarrassed to talk about.

JONATHAN HUNT: Such as?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: Such as Muhammad's wives. You will never go to a mosque and hear about anyone talking about Muhammad's wives, which is like more than 50 wives — and nobody knows (this), by the way. If you ask the majority of Muslims, they will not know this fact. So they're embarrassed to talk about this, but they talk about the glory of Islam, they talk about the victory, the victories that Muhammad made. So, when people just like look at themselves and see they're defeated, they have ignorance, they're not educated, they're not leading the world as they're expected to do. They're think they want to get back to that victory by doing the same, what Muhammad did, but disregarding (sic) the timing. They forget that this happened 1,400 years ago and it's not going to happen again.

JONATHAN HUNT: Do they want to destroy Christianity?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: Islam destroyed Christianity from the beginning and Muslims don't recognize that they stabbed Christianity (in) its heart when they said that Jesus wasn't killed on the cross. They think that they honor him in this way.

Basically, any Christians understand that this way, (but Muslims) tell Jesus, okay, we don't care, you didn't die for us. Someone sacrificed his life for you, (but) you tell him, okay, you didn't do it!

This is what Muslims are doing basically. But they don't understand that this is the most important part of Christianity: the cross!

So, they are ignorant, they don't know what they are doing and it explains what an evil idea it is behind this Islam.

JONATHAN HUNT: What specific event or events began to change your mind about Islam?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: Since I was a child I started to ask very difficult questions, even my family was telling me all the time, 'You're a very difficult person and we were having trouble answering your questions. Why are you asking so many questions?' This was from the beginning, to be honest with you.

But I felt that everybody — and my father was a good example for me because he was a very honest, humble person, very nice to my mother, to us, and raised us on the principle of forgiveness, okay? I thought that everybody in Islam was like this.

When I was 18 years old, and I was arrested by the Israelis and was in an Israeli jail under the Israeli administration, Hamas had control of its members inside the jail and I saw their torture; (they were) torturing people in a very, very bad way.

JONATHAN HUNT: Hamas members torturing other Hamas members?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: Hamas leaders! Hamas leaders that we see on TV now, and big leaders, responsible for torturing their own members. They didn't torture me, but that was a shock for me, to see them torturing people: putting needles under their nails, burning their bodies. And they killed lots of them.

JONATHAN HUNT: Why were they torturing people?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: Because they suspected that they had relations with the Israelis and (were) co-operating with the Israeli occupation against Hamas ... So hundreds of people were victims for this, and I was a witness for about a year for this torture. So that was a huge change in my life. I started to open my (eyes), but, the point (is) that I got that there are good Muslims and bad Muslims. Good Muslims, such as my father, and bad Muslims, like those Hamas members in the jail torturing people.

So that was the beginning of opening my eyes wide.

JONATHAN HUNT: You talk about the good Muslims, like your father, yet you still now renounce the faith of your father. Could you have not been a good Muslim?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: Now, here's the reality: after I studied Christianity — which I had a big misunderstanding about, because I studied about Christianity from Islam, which is, there is nothing true about Christianity when you study it from Islam, and that was the only source.

When I studied the Bible carefully verse by verse, I made sure that that was the book of God, the word of God for sure, so I started to see things in a different way, which was difficult for me, to say Islam is wrong.

Islam is my father. I grew up for (one) father — 22 years for that father — and another father came to me and told me, 'I'm sorry, I'm your father.' And I was like, 'What are you talking about? Like, I have my own father, and it's Islam!' And the father of Christianity told me, 'No, I'm your father. I was in jail, and this (Islam) is not your father.'

So basically this is what happened. It's not easy to believe this (Islam) is not

your father anymore. So I had to study Islam again from a different point of view to figure out all the mistakes, the huge mistakes and its effects, not only on Muslims — (of) which I hated the values ... I didn't like all those traditions that make people's lives more difficult — but its effects also on humanity. On humanity! People killing each other (in) the name of God.

So definitely I started to figure out the problem is Islam, not the Muslims and those people — I can't hate them because God loved them from the beginning. And God doesn't create junk. God created good people that he loved, but they're sick, they have the wrong idea. I don't hate those people anymore but I feel very sorry for them and the only way for them to be changed (is) by knowing the word of God and the real way to him.

JONATHAN HUNT: Does it worry you that in saying these things — and given your background and your words carrying extra weight — there is a danger that you will increase the difficulties, the hatred between Christians and Muslims in the world right now?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: This could happen if a Christian person will go talk to them about the reality of Islam. They put Christians on the enemy list anyway, before you talk to them about Islam. So if you go to them and tell them, as a Christian, they will be offended immediately and they will hate you and this will definitely increase the vacuum between both religions — but what made someone like me change?

Years ago, years ago, when I was there, God opened my eyes, my mind also, and I became a completely different person. So now, I can do this duty, while you as Christians can help me do it, but maybe you wouldn't be able to. (Muslims) have no excuse now.

JONATHAN HUNT: How difficult a process has this been for you to effectively walk away from your family, leave your home behind? How difficult is that?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: Taking your skin off your bones, that's what happened. I love my family, they love me. And my little brothers, they're like my sons. I raised them. Basically, it was the biggest decision in my life.

I left everything behind me, not only family. When you decide to convert to Christianity or any other religion from Islam, it's not (enough) to just say goodbye and leave, you know? It's not like that. You're saying goodbye to culture, civilization, traditions, society, family, religion,

God — what you thought was God for so many years! So it's not easy. It's very complicated. People think it's that easy, like it doesn't matter. Now I'm here in the U.S. and I got my freedom and it's great, but at the same time, nothing is like family, you know. To lose your family —

JONATHAN HUNT: Have you lost your family?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: My family is educated and it was very difficult for them. They asked me many times, especially for the first two days, to keep my faith to myself and not go to the media and announce it. But for me it was a duty from God to announce his name and praise him (around) the world because my reward is going to be that he's going to do the same for me. So I did it, basically, as a duty. I (wonder) how many people can do what I can do today? I didn't find any.

So, I had to be strong about that. That was very challenging. That was the most difficult decision in my life and I didn't do it for fun. I didn't do it for anything from this world. I did it only for one reason: I believed in it. People are suffering every day because of wrong ideas. I can help them get out of this endless circle ... the track the devil (laid) for them.

JONATHAN HUNT: Have you spoken to your father recently?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: There is no chance to communicate with my father because he's in jail now and there is (sic) no phones in the jail to communicate with him.

JONATHAN HUNT: Have other members of your family told you how he's reacted?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: They've visited him from time to time. Till this moment, I don't know his reaction exactly but I'm sure he's very sad (over) a decision like this. But at the same time, he's going to understand, because he knows me and he knows that I don't make any decisions without (believing strongly in them).

JONATHAN HUNT: Is it making his life more difficult among fellow Hamas members?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: Definitely. My family, including my father, had to carry this cross with me. It wasn't their choice. It was my choice, but they had to carry this cross with me and I ask God — I pray for (my father), all my brothers and my sisters here in this church, praying all the time for them — 'God, open their eyes, their minds, to come to Christ. And bless them because they had to carry this cross with me.'

JONATHAN HUNT: Tell me about Hamas and the way it works. Is Hamas a purely Islamic religious organization as you see it, and that's where, in your eyes, its faults lie, or are there other parts of it which are a problem for you? Or is Hamas a good organization? What is Hamas to you?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: If we talk about people, there are good people everywhere. Everywhere. I mean, good people that God created.

Do they do their own things? Yes, they do their own things. I know people who support Hamas but they never got involved in terrorist attacks, for example ... They follow Hamas because they love God and they think that Hamas represents God. They don't have knowledge, they don't know the real God and they never studied Christianity. But Hamas, as representative for Islam, it's a big problem.

The problem is not Hamas, the problem is not people. The root of the problem is Islam itself as an idea, as an idea. And about Hamas as an organization, of course, the Hamas leadership, including my father, they're responsible; they're responsible for all the violence that happened from the organization. I know they describe it as reaction to Israeli aggression, but still, they are part of it and they had to make decisions in those operations against Israel, (for) which there was the killing of many civilians.

JONATHAN HUNT: Do you believe Israel blameless in the conflict?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: Occupation is bad. I can't say Israel — I'm not against any nation. We can't say Israelis, we can't say Palestinians, we're talking about ideas. Israel has the right to defend itself, nobody can (argue) against this. But sometimes they use (too much) aggression against civilians. Sometimes many civilians were killed because those soldiers weren't responsible enough, how they treat people at the checkpoints.

My message even to the Israeli soldiers: at least treat people in a good way at the checkpoints. You don't have to look really bad and it's not about nations, it's about just wrong ideas on both sides and the only way for two nations really to get out of the endless circle is to know the principles that Jesus brought to this earth: grace, love, forgiveness. Without this, they will never be able to move on, or break this endless circle.

JONATHAN HUNT: You've seen your father jailed, you've been in prison yourself. You've seen Hamas carry out acts of terror against Israelis, and yet you say everybody needs to rise above that?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: Definitely. This is the only choice. Nobody has magic power to do something for the Middle East. No one. You can ask any politician here in the U.S., you can ask any Palestinian politician or Arab politician, Israeli leaders; no one, no one can do anything. Even if they believe in peace now: they're part of the game.

They're part of the trick. They can't, even if you find a brave person, like Rabin, who was called by an Israeli to make peace with the Palestinians and give them a state, no one, even if you find a strong leader, they can't do this. You can't force an independent country to give another

country independence. (Especially when) the other country wants to destroy it.

Everybody is hurt. Israeli soldiers, they lost their friends. Palestinians, they lost their children, their fathers. (There are) many people in prison still, and many people were killed. Thousands. So everybody will never forget this. If they want to keep looking to the past, they will never get out of this circle. The only way to start (is just by) moving on. They were born under the occupation as Palestinians.

The last two generations, it's not their choice. The new generations from Israel — if we say disregarding the existence of Israel is right or wrong, what's the guilt of those people who were born in Israel and they have no other country to go to? It's their country now, that's how they see it. And they are going to keep their resistance and defense against whomever. (They will) say, 'Get out of this land!' So the only way is for both nations to start to understand the grace, love and forgiveness of God, to be able to get out of this.

JONATHAN HUNT: Do you believe that Israel can ever strike a peace deal with Hamas?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: There is no chance. Is there any chance for fire to co-exist with the water? There is no chance. Hamas can play politics for 10 years, 15 years; but ask any one of Hamas' leaders, 'Okay, what's going to happen after that? Are you just going to live and co-exist with Israel forever?' The answer is going to be no ... unless they want to do something against the Koran. But it's their ideology and they can't just say 'We're not going to do it.' So there is no chance. It's not about Israel, it's not about Hamas: it's about both ideologies. There is no chance.

JONATHAN HUNT: Aren't you terrified that somebody is going to try to kill you for saying these things — which would be approved of according to parts of the Koran?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: They got to kill my ideas first, (and) that's it, they're already out. So how are they going to kill my idea? How are they going to kill the opinions that I have? ... They can kill my body, but they can't kill my soul.

JONATHAN HUNT: You're not afraid?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: As a human, you know, I can be very brave now, I'm not thinking about it at this moment and I feel that God is on my side. But if this will be the challenge, I ask God to give me enough strength.

JONATHAN HUNT: Have you been threatened?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: No, not really. Honestly, most Muslims and Muslim leaders here in the U.S. community, European communities, they are trying to get ahold of me. They are calling my family, my mother, and asking for my contacts. They are telling her, 'We want to help him.'

JONATHAN HUNT: They think you need help?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: Yeah, they think that Christians took advantage of me, and this is completely wrong. I've been a Christian for a long time before they knew, or anyone knew. I love Jesus, I followed him for many years now. It wasn't a secret for most of the time, and this time I just did it to glorify the name of God and praise him.

They're not dealing with a regular Muslim. They know that I'm educated, they know that I studied, they know that I studied Islam and Christianity. When I made my decision, I didn't make it because someone did magic on me or convinced me. It was completely my decision.

JONATHAN HUNT: Do you miss Ramallah?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: Definitely. You've been there and you know how a wonderful country (it is). Very, very beautiful. It's a very small spot and it has everything — this is why people are fighting for that piece of land. I definitely miss Ramallah. Jerusalem. The Old City.

JONATHAN HUNT: Do you believe you will ever be able to go back?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: I think I belong to that land, and sooner or later I'm going to go back, no matter what. If they want to kill me, they (will) do whatever they want to do. I have a family there, they love me, they completely support me now with my decisions. Maybe they don't want me to talk to the media but they believe that I made a decision that I completely believe in. So they support me, so I love my family. I'm going to go back there again one day. I love my town.

JONATHAN HUNT: Do you think you'll ever go back to a Middle East living in peace?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: There will be a 100-person peace when Jesus comes back, when he judges everybody. His kingdom's going to be 1,000 years and it's going to be completely peaceful and it's going to be the kingdom of God.

JONATHAN HUNT: What is your basic message to any Muslim listening to this right now?

MOSAB HASSAN YOUSEF: My message to them is, first of all, to open their minds. They were born to Muslim families — this is how they got Islam and this is just like ... any other religion, like growing up (in) a Christian family, or growing up (in) a Jewish family.

So my point is that I want those people to open their eyes, their minds, to start to understand and imagine that they weren't born for a Muslim family. And use their minds.

Why did God give them minds? Open their hearts. Read the Bible. Study their religion. I want to open the gate for them, I want them to be free. They will find a good life on earth just by following God — and they're also going to guarantee the other life.

Christians arrested

Raipur (Chhattisgarh): Police on January 5, 2009 arrested ten Christians on the basis of the complaint lodged by Hindu extremists in Kua Kunda police station, Dendewada.

According to reports, Bastar for Christ (BFC) church was having a Christmas picnic in Phulpad on December 25. The waste plates and the leftovers from the picnic were taken to a Hindu temple by some miscreants and a picture was taken.

On the basis of this photograph, the extremists filed a police complaint against the believers of BFC church. The police arrested ten Christians including the church associate pastor identified as Shankar Sona for defil-

ing a place of worship.

The Christians were released the same day on bail.

In another incident, on January 18, 2009, about 1000 Hindu extremists opposing the Christians gathered in Palnar, Dendewada, Chhattisgarh.

The extremists shouted anti-Christian's slogans protesting the Christian's activities in the area, claiming that they wanted to wipe out all the Christians and their activities in the area. The police after several calls by the Christian leaders came to the spot and dispersed the crowd.

The report also says that many Christians in these areas were beaten and attacked because of their faith.

Pastor summoned for enquiry

Bhopal (Madhya Pradesh): Hindu extremists allegedly from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh on January 18 lodged a police complaint against a pastor, accusing him of selling a book titled, "Secularism and Hindutva" by M.G Matthew in Annupur.

EFI correspondent, Akhilesh Edgar reported that Pastor Paulose Venkatrao from the Pentecostal Church was organising a three day convention, where non-Christians and Christians were invited.

The local Christians opened up a book stall in the Convention in which were also some books written by M.G Matthew, an advocate in Kerala.

The extremists picked up the book called "Secularism and Hindutva" and lodged a police complaint against some lines in the book.

The police on the basis of the complaint went to the pastor's house for enquiry on January 18. The next day he was summoned to the police station for further questioning.

The police let him go but told him to be ready for any further interrogation.

Pastor beaten

Hyderabad (Andhra Pradesh): On January 16, Pastor Yakobu (37) was attacked by Hindu militants at his home in Gumpula village.

At approximately midnight, Pastor Yakobu was home alone when he heard a knock on his door. When he answered, six men burst in, beat him, cut him with a knife and shaved his head.

They also set fire to his clothes and books and shouted that they didn't want any pastors in the village. The next morning, Pastor Yakobu and several local pastors went to the police station and filed a complaint against the attackers.

prayer for the Alams. "Please pray for Parvisha and Sanam and their family," the spokesman said. "Pray that God would strengthen their faith and heal their wounds. Pray that those responsible for these heinous crimes would be caught and punished appropriately."

About 500,000 young women worldwide are sold into sex slavery each year — 150,000 of them in southern Asia, according to U.S. State Department figures reported by The New York Times.

Christian girls rescued from sex slavery

Karachi (Pakistan): Two Christian girls in Pakistan have been rescued after more than a month of captivity as sex slaves to Muslim lawyers in Karachi.

According to International Christian Concern, a human rights organization focused on Christians who are persecuted for their faith, Parvisha Alam, 18, and her 14-year-old sister Sanam of Gujranwala, Pakistan, were abducted Nov. 12 by a neighbor, Muhammad Irfan, who offered them training in cosmetology and jobs in his beauty salon.

When Irfan arrived to take the girls to his shop, he and an accomplice, Muhammed Mehboob, reportedly gave the girls drinks that were drugged. When the sisters awakened, they were locked in a hotel room nearly 500 miles away from home. According to ICC, the two men raped the girls at gunpoint, then took them to Karachi where, after several more days of sexual assault, the girls were

forced to convert to Islam.

Promised that if they cooperated they would be released soon, the two girls were taken to meet with two lawyers, identified by ICC as Kokab Sahab-Ul-Din and Nayer Zia-Ul-Din. Irfan reportedly told the lawyers both girls had embraced Islam and wished to enter a government women's shelter. The girls were told the lawyers would present them in court the next day and they would be free to go.

The lawyers then allegedly took the girls to an apartment for the night and gave them a room to sleep in. After the girls had fallen asleep, the lawyers returned and dragged Parvisha Alam into another room and sexually assaulted her, according to the ICC report. Her sister ran to help her, then saw a cell phone lying on a table, which she used to call police. The police arrested Sahab-Ul-Din, and Parvisha was taken immediately to a hospital.

The girls' father, Sharif Alam,

who is a pastor, traveled to Karachi to bring his daughters home then contacted CLAAS, a Christian legal group for help. When the CLAAS team visited the family Dec. 31, a crowd of about 35 people gathered outside the house, demanding the "converted" girls be turned over to local Muslim authorities, according to ICC.

The crowd began throwing bricks and stones at the house and when Alam went out to talk with them a gun was fired. The mob beat Alam's son Sheraz and was trying to break into the house when police arrived. Three people were arrested for the attack.

Since that incident, Alam's son-in-law, Stian Akram Khokhar, has disappeared, according to the family.

"Christians in Pakistan are often targeted not only for their faith but because they live in poverty and have little means to defend themselves," an ICC spokesman said in a written statement.

The spokesman also requested

Anti-Christian violence continues in India

New Delhi: Ten years after the Christmas violence in the Dangs district of Gujarat in 1998, and the burning alive of Australian missionary Graham Stuart Staines, on 22 January 1999, in Orissa, anti Christian violence has not just grown in the two regions, but has spread to other states such as Karnataka. Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh.

Karnataka, in fact, has now surpassed Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh, which were earlier the main areas witnessing persecution. In Orissa, where violence broke out between 24 to 27 December 2007 and then again between 24 August 2008 till the end of the year, a chilling tension still pervades the worst affected district of Kandhamal.

In government camps in G Udaygiri and Raikia in Kandhamal, more than Eight Thousand refugees live a life of torment, humiliation and unemployment. The un-totaled thousands in small and big Church-run camps outside Kandhamal and even deep in Andhra Pradesh that have

little coordination with each other, people face an uncertain future. And perhaps 30,000 people still escape to the forests every night to sleep the night in the safety of raw nature, for fear of the marauding gangs.

During sunlight hours, they attempt to harvest the paddy crop in the safer areas. Christian and Civil Society groups tried unsuccessfully to move the Courts to stop a government move to forcibly send back people from refugee camps back to distant villages without providing adequate security and employment.

The Central Reserve Police Force has begun to thin out from its peak strength of 6,000 on the eve of Christmas, despite earnest requests to government to maintain sufficient numbers to bring confidence to the battered people.

Criminal Investigation Department police are making some headway in the investigations in the rape of the Catholic nun, and that of another woman, a Hindu brutalized because her uncle had converted to

Christianity. But police also admit that they will have to "trim" the list of about 70,000 persons named as aggressors in over in 746 cases to manageable numbers.

The new Director General of Police feels that in each case only a clutch of principal accused can be investigated. So far 598 accused have been actually arrested. Christians have told investigators that many of the aggressors are still roaming free, and some murder suspects have even come to the government refugee camps.

The death toll remains a matter of dispute. Human rights groups have a total of 120 names of persons of whom 103 are confirmed dead, and 17 are those whose names are not known, but are known only by their relationship with some villagers. Though there have been several other incidents in December and mid January 2009, they have not been directly linked with the earlier sequence of violence.

Reconstruction of the houses is yet to begin, and churches await the government assistance promised them by

the Government after the intervention of the Supreme Court of India. A brief recall of major persecution:

ORISSA:

14 (of 30) Districts hit, 315 Villages destroyed, 4,640 Houses burnt [State government estimates 4,215], 54,000 Homeless initially; 120 People murdered; 7 Priests/ Pastors killed; 10 Fathers/Pastors/ Nuns injured; 2 Rapes confirmed [One of Nun]; 252 Churches destroyed [estimated by State government]; 13 Schools, colleges destroyed.

2. KARNATAKA

8 (of 29) Districts affected; 33 Churches attacked update again; 53 Christians injured in attacks, including Nuns assaulted by state police.

3. TAMIL NADU

12 Churches attacked

4. MADHYA PRADESH

5 Churches damaged

5. KERALA

4 Churches damaged

6. DELHI

2 Churches damaged/destroyed.

Eritrean Christians refuse to deny Christ, die of torture

Asmara: Two Eritrean Christians died recently in the Mitire Military Confinement Centre after enduring torture for their faith, according to reports.

On January 16, 2009, Mehari Gebreneguse Asgedom (42), a member of the Living God Church, succumbed to health complications caused by diabetes and mistreatment while in solitary confinement. An-

other believer, Mogos Hagos Kiflom (37), also died recently after undergoing torture for refusing to recant his faith.

Kiflom, a member of Rhema Church, is survived by his wife, child and mother. These deaths bring to three the number of Eritrean Christians who have perished in prison at the hands of officials in the past four months.

Restrictive law signed

Baku (Azerbaijan): The draft religion law that passed parliament in the unrecognized Azerbaijani breakaway republic of Nagorno-Karabakh in late November was approved and signed by President Bako Sahakyan on December 24, according to delayed reports.

The law, which is to come into effect 10 days after its publication is complete, includes an apparent ban on unregistered religious activity. Other restrictions include the censorship of religious literature by the state and the ban on some religious groups from spreading their faith.

Christians arrested

Belgaum (Karnataka): Karnataka police arrested two Christians on the basis of the complaint lodged by Hanmant Gargoti on January 9 in Gangavadi, Belgaum.

According to reports, Pastor Iswar Albannavar from Throne of Grace Ministry was conducting a prayer meeting at about 6:30 p.m. when the police entered into his house alleging forcible conversion.

The police took Pastor Albannavar and one believer identified as Raju Kolkar to Mala Maruthi Police Station. The two Christians remain in Belgaum central jail.

Pastor Albannavar conducts weekly prayer meeting every Friday in their home in Gangavadi slum. He is mainly ministering among the recovering alcoholics.

Christians still targetted

Bangalore (Karnataka): The High Court has reopened approximately 12 churches that were closed down by the Deputy Commissioner of Davangere district in early September due to claims that forcible conversions were taking place.

However, Christians are facing threats and violent attacks from Hindu militants in the state. At approximately 7:30 p.m. on January 9, 2009 police officials disrupted a weekly prayer meeting held in the home of Pastor Iswar Albannavar (30) and his wife, Renuka Iswar

Restrictive religion law proposed

Dushanbe (Tajikistan): A restrictive draft religion law was sent by Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon to the parliament for approval recently.

The draft law allegedly restricts the activity of religious organizations, limits religious education, and imposes state censorship over religious literature. If the law passes, religious organizations currently registered would be forced to re-register by July 1.

However, the draft law's stringent requirements would make it difficult for some groups to continue to qualify for registration.

Relief camps closed in Orissa

Bhubaneswar: Government authorities have shut down relief camps in the state, forcing the thousands of Christians displaced by the wave of violence that began in August, 2008, to flee without adequate protection against further attacks or compensation for damages sustained.

Many of the believers were threatened with violence while in the camps and fear further attacks if they return to their homes, many of which have not been rebuilt. Officials are providing some of the refugees with 10,000 rupees.

However, the sum is inadequate to meet the believers' long-term needs and it is unlikely that many will be able to secure employment, as local Hindus often refuse to hire Christians for any job.

Albannavar (26), in Gangavadi, Belgaum district and accused the couple of forcible conversion.

The police confiscated Bibles and hymnals and took several believers to the police station. Although the Christians stated that they were not coerced into attending the meeting, Pastor Albannavar and another believer were charged with "promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion and doing acts prejudicial to maintenance of harmony." At last report, the two Christians remained in detention.

Restrictive religion law passed in Kyrgyzstan

Bishkek: The draft religion law approved by Kyrgyzstan's parliament in early November has been signed and approved by President Kurmanbek Bakiev, according to a recent reports.

Religious leaders across Kyrgyzstan have expressed concern for their communities, especially those with small numbers. The new religion law stipulates that 200 adult citizens are

necessary to apply for state registration, whereas previously only 10 citizens were required. The new law also bans the involvement of children in religious organizations, forbids religious groups from spreading their faith and prohibits the distribution of religious material.

Kyrgyzstan is also following the line of many of former Soviet Union republics in passing such laws.

Christians lobby against anti conversion bill

Colombo (Sri Lanka): On January 6, an anti-conversion bill that has been proposed in various forms in recent years was again presented by the Buddhist-led Jathika Hela Urumaya (National Heritage Party) to the Sri Lankan Parliament.

The All Ceylon Buddhist Congress launched a report that contained highly inflammatory and false accusations against the Christian community in an attempt to bolster support for the repressive legislation.

The purpose of the bill, which was first presented in 2004 is to "provide prohibition of conversion from one religion to another by use of force or allurement or by fraudulent

means." The current legislation no longer contains two clauses that the Supreme Court deemed unconstitutional following challenges from several civil and religious rights groups.

However, Christians and other religious minorities remain concerned because the bill, if passed, will introduce serious penalties for those found guilty of "forcibly" converting people, including jail terms, and could violate the right to religion and worship in the country.

The National Christian Evangelical Alliance of Sri Lanka, a VOMC partner, is urging immediate attention in advocating against the proposed anti-conversion bill.

Four believers arrested

Bhopal (Madhya Pradesh: In yet another incident of state oppression of Christians, police arrested four Christians on false charges of forcible conversion in the village of Kushalपुरa on January 5, 2009.

At approximately 10:00 a.m., Pastor Kantilal Bhuria (35) went to the home of a local Christian where 25 believers were gathered for prayer. During the service. A group of about ten Hindu extremists from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World

Hindu Council or VHP) alongwith police personnel barged into a worship service conducted by Pastor Bhuria and Evangelist Baria and accused them of forcible conversion. Also, the militants verbally abused those present and beat a Christian woman.

The police arrested four believers under Section 295 of the Indian penal code for defiling a place of worship with intends to insult. Later, the Christians were released on bail on January 7, 2009.

Church burnt in Karnataka

Davangere: Hindu extremists on January 1 burned a house church of Resurrected God's Ministry in Malai Bennur, Davangere district, Karnataka. The extremists burned the church in the early hours of the morning and further threatened Pastor Gangadhar that they would burn his family alive if the matter is taken to higher authorities.

It was also reported that this was the second attack on Pastor Gangadhar's church with the earlier incident taking place on November 11, 2007.

One person identified as B. Gangadhar has been arrested under Section 436 of the Indian Penal Code for intend to destroy house with fire or explosive.

Church vandalized

Tirunelveli (Tamil Nadu): In yet another incident of religious bogotism in South India in recent times, unidentified miscreants on December 22, 2008 vandalized a church in Shenkotta near here.

The assailants destroyed the doors and cupboards of the Thomas Evangelical Church of India. The PA system and the ceiling fans were also stolen. Bibles and church literature were torn and scattered all over the church. It was also reported that the local people in the area have threatened evangelist Manoj Kumar to stop his work prior to the attack.

A case has been registered under Section 457 and 380 of the Indian Penal Code but no arrests had been made.

Pastor attacked, wife gang-raped in Bangladesh

Dhakka: Pastor Shankar Hazra (55) and his wife Depali (45) were attacked by Muslims outside their home on the Chakxing Baptist church property in Gopalganj district, Bangladesh on January 6, 2009.

According to reports, in the early morning, the couple went outside to use the washroom when approximately seven Muslims surrounded them. They tied Pastor Hazra to the porch and blindfolded Depali and forced her inside the house. The assailants looted the couple's belongings and gang-raped Depali.

Upon leaving the house, they broke into the nearby church building where they urinated and defecated on the floor. Pastor Hazra was

eventually able to untie himself and get help for his unconscious wife.

Although the couple testifies that their attackers were Muslim, police officers, Muslim-owned media and some influential citizens have made the claim that the crime was actually committed by two Christians and a Hindu under the direction of another local pastor.

When the police stated these allegations in the initial report, Pastor Hazra signed the document without reading it because he was so shaken from the attack. Depali has since written a corrected statement of the events. At last report, the couple was living with relatives to avoid further attacks.

Govt. abolishes house church alliance

Beijing (China): Pastor "Bike" Zhang Mingxuan attempted to file an "Administrative Statement of Complaint" against the Chinese government's decision to abolish the Chinese House Church Alliance, but the court refused to accept the case.

In support of the Chinese House Church Alliance, 15 Chinese Christian legal professionals and intellectuals have issued a formal solemn declaration against the actions of the Ministry of Civil Affairs, stating in part, "If this order of abolishment continues to be used in other expanded areas, this could well cause the abolishment of all the Christian house churches."

The actions of Zhang and the legal professionals are in protest of the Ministry of Civil Affairs' "Decision Statement on Abolishment of the Chinese House Church Alliance" announced on November 28, 2008.

The same morning the abolishment was announced, officers arrested 17 Christians and an American reporter who were holding a prayer meeting in Zhang's residence.

Accused of "illegal business operations"

In earlier reports, Pastor Zhang "Bike" Mingxuan, who had been under fire from authorities along with his family some months ago, was accused of engaging in "illegal business

Persecution in Muslim islands

Dodoma (Tanzania): Christians on the predominantly Muslim islands of Pemba and the Comoros are beaten, detained and banished for their faith, according to church leaders who travel regularly to the Indian Ocean isles off the east coast of Africa.

These violations of religious freedom, the church leaders said, threaten the survival of Christianity on Pemba and the Comoros, with fewer than 300 Christians in a combined population of 1.1 million people. Leaving Islam for Christianity accounts for most of the harm done to Christians, and this year saw an increase in such abuse as already-

strained relations between the two communities deteriorated after the conversion in August of Sheikh Hijah Mohammed, leader of a key mosque in Pemba.

In addition, a Christian from the Tanzanian island of Zanzibar who recently visited the Comoros said those suspected to have converted from Islam to Christianity face travel restrictions and confiscation of travel documents. Speaking on condition of anonymity, he noted that security officers who had been monitoring the ministries of a 25-year-old Christian confiscated his passport at the airport in July, 2008.

Christian family persecuted

Dhakka (Bangladesh): The harassment that Bangladeshi converts from Islam face from Muslim neighbors in southeastern Bangladesh can take serious turns as it did last month when an attack by about a dozen Muslims left a Christian family with machete wounds.

Confident that no police would side with Christian converts from Islam, the Muslims in Chakaria (near Cox's Bazaar 236 miles southeast of Dhaka) later filed false assault charges against the wounded Christians, according to family members.

Laila Begum, a Christian convert from Islam, said that on November 1, 2008 some 10 to 15 Muslim neighbors demanded 200 taka (US\$3).

Begum said she had borrowed 2,000 taka (US\$30) the previous year from a Muslim neighbor and this year paid her back with interest. She told the group of Muslims that she would pay no more, and they began beating her. The family informed local governing council members about the attack, but they demanded 20,000 taka (US\$300) to settle the matter and also threatened them, Begum said.

Christian woman sexually assaulted in prison, gets bail

Cairo (Egypt): A Christian woman who was arrested along with her family at the Cairo International Airport in December was granted bail on January 24, 2009.

When Zainab Said Abel-Aziz (24) — who goes by the Christian name of Martha Samuel Makkar — converted to Christianity from Islam in 2003, she and her husband endured serious threats and harassment from both Egyptian police and family members. Longing to flee these assaults, Martha obtained a passport issued in her Christian name and made plans to escape the country along with her family.

However, authorities apprehended them as they were preparing

to board a flight to Russia on December 13, 2008. Martha was charged with possessing forged documents and was taken to the El-Nozha police station along with her two children, aged two and four.

Her husband, Fadl Thabet (32), was taken to the National Security Office in Alexandria, Somoha District for questioning and was later released on January 19, 2009. Officials handed the children over to the care of family friends before moving Martha to Al-Qanata prison where she was reportedly sexually assaulted by officials and mistreated by other inmates.

After being granted bail, she was allowed to return home to her husband and children pending trial.

operations."

During Pastor Zhang's detention, authorities interrogated him about his involvement in distributing silicon prayer bands during the Olympic Games, which authorities considered a "nationally politically sen-

Polish priest forced to leave Belarus

Minsk: Belarusian authorities have refused to extend the visa of Father Zbigniew Grygorcewicz, a Polish priest, in an attempt to force him to leave the country.

Father Grygorcewicz, who ministers at the Borisov's Nativity of the Virgin Mary Roman Catholic parish, claims the refusal was related to his involvement in holding a Christian music concert in September, 2008. Authorities originally granted permis-

sive item."

Pastor Zhang, who had been in Beijing since October 31, was forbidden from renting a residence or staying in hotels in the city and authorities continued to try to intimidate and discredit him.

sion for the concert but then withdrew their support shortly before the event began. Grygorcewicz was reportedly told to be out of the country by January 1, 2009.

Four Catholic priests and three nuns (all from Poland) had been banned on religious work in Belarus. These bans bring to 28 the number of foreign religious workers banned from working with local religious communities since 2004.

Christians detained

Dhakka (Bangladesh): It has been reported that on December 10, 13 believers who had converted to Christianity from Buddhism approximately four months earlier were forcibly taken to a pagoda in Rangamati district, Chittagong division here by Buddhist clerics and local council officials.

In an attempt to coerce them to reconvert to Buddhism, the Christians

were reportedly pressured by the fanatics into undergoing Buddhist rituals, such as shaving their heads and wearing saffron robes.

According to Bangladeshi Christian leaders, believers in this predominantly Buddhist area often face eviction from their homes or bodily harm if they refuse to return to Buddhism.

Crack down on house churches

Beijing (China): Pastor Zhang "Bike" Mingxuan and other underground Christians have been targeted by authorities in recent days due to a statement released on November 28 by the Ministry of Civil Affairs calling for the elimination of the Chinese House Church Alliance.

According to delayed reports Pastor Zhang, the President of the Chinese House Church Alliance, was detained by four officers in Nanyang, Henan province, at approximately 7:00 a.m. When authorities demanded that he sign the Ministry's statement, he refused. Pastor Zhang's

wife was also detained by authorities but was later released. Seventeen Christians who were worshipping at Pastor Zhang's residence, including an American journalist and his translator, were apprehended at approximately 10:00 a.m., photographed and forced to sign documents.

Although they were later released, authorities confiscated their computers, cell phones, magazines, and over 600 Bibles. The journalist and translator were escorted by officials to an airplane leaving Nanyang for Beijing. At the time of the report, Pastor Zhang remained in detention.

Christian sisters raped, forcefully converted to Islam in Pakistan

Islamabad: Christian sisters Parvisha Masih (18) and Sanam Masih (14) face a long legal battle after escaping from Muslim kidnappers who raped and forced them to convert to Islam.

In early November, two Muslim men, Muhammad Irfan and Muhammad Mehboob, convinced the girls to get into their car by offering them positions at a salon to help support their family. The girls were subsequently drugged and taken to a hotel in the city of Mianwali where they were held

at gunpoint, raped and threatened with death if they reveal anything or attempted to escape.

The next day, they were driven to the city of Karachi where they were held for several days in the home of Mehboob's brother-in-law. Both girls were forcibly converted to Islam and their names were changed. The captors then took Parvisha and Sanam to a lawyer's office, reportedly to arrange their transfer to a government shelter for women.

Christians sentenced to 're-education' through labour

Beijing (China): Three Christians who were arrested in Taikang county, Henan province on December 3, 2008 have been sentenced to one year of "re-education through labour" for "illegal proselytizing" and attending

an "illegal gathering," according to reports.

Twenty of the other Christians arrested in the raid were sentenced to 15 days of administrative detention and fined 1,000 Yuan.

Missionary couple sentenced

Banjul (Gambia): David Fulton (60) and his wife Fiona (46), British missionaries who were arrested on charges of sedition in late November in Gambia, were sentenced on December 30 to one year of hard labour in prison and fined 250,000 Dalasis.

They had pleaded guilty to the charges in the hope that they would receive a lighter sentence. Gambia's president, Yahya Jammeh, however, is known for cracking down on any perceived criticism of him or his government.

According to Glenn Penner, Vice of the Martyrs' CEO, "It is not a crime to criticize a government. In the 21st century, this type of repression is ludicrous. The charges brought against the Fultons say more about the government than they do about the couple."

The couple has been sent to the notoriously severe Mile Two Prison to carry out their sentences. At last report, their two-year-old adopted daughter was being cared for by friends.

Christian blogger arrested

Riyadh (Saudi Arabia): On January 13, 2009 Saudi police arrested Hamoud Bin Saleh (28) and blocked access to his online blog, according to reports from The Arabic Network for Human Rights Information.

Saleh had used his blog to express his opinion on religious issues and discuss his conversion from Islam to Christianity.

Saleh was previously arrested for his faith in 2004 and imprisoned for nine months. He was also briefly detained in November 2008 and was

released shortly before the Saudi-sponsored interfaith dialogue conference held on November 12-13 at the UN Headquarters in New York.

Sources believe officials released him to avoid tarnishing Saudi Arabia's image of religious tolerance, as at the conference King Abdullah spoke out against mankind's "preoccupation with differences between the followers of religions."

At last report, Saleh was detained in the Eleisha political prison in Riyadh, the nation's capital.

Brothers falsely accused

Cairo (Egypt): It has been reported that two Egyptian Christian brothers, Refaat and Ibrahim Fawzy Abdo, were falsely accused of murdering a Muslim here.

The brothers were sent to the El Wadi El Gadid Detention Camp on November 22 in an attempt to coerce them into confessing to the crime, according to reports.

Approximately 60 armed Muslims stormed the Abu Fana monastery in Mallawi, Upper Egypt on May 31 where the brothers worked as building contractors. A Muslim was killed, four Christians injured, and

three monks briefly kidnapped in the attack. The brothers were subsequently charged with the murder even though they were not on the premises when the violence broke out.

In the initial days of their detention, they were tortured with electric shocks eight hours a day for three days in an attempt to make them testify that the monks at the monastery were armed. Sources believe that authorities are using the brothers as leverage against the Coptic Church to make Christians confess that the attack on the monastery was not religiously motivated.

House churches banned

Yangon (Myanmar): The Burmese military has prohibited Christian and Muslim groups in the city of Yangon from holding prayer meetings in private homes.

The property owners of buildings rented by believers for their worship services were recently handed an order by officials of the Rangoon division Religious Affairs Department, demanding they prohibit these meetings or face the confiscation or closure of their property.

Since the government rarely permits religious groups from owning or constructing places of worship, local Christians estimate that the majority of churches will be affected.

Christians arrested

Tehran (Iran): Three Christians were arrested in the city on January 21. At approximately 7:00 a.m., officials apprehended Hamik Khachikian, an Armenian Christian, as well as Jamal Ghalishorani (49) and his wife, Nadereh Jamali, who are converts to Christianity from Islam.

Books and computers were confiscated from the believers' homes. At last report, the location of the three Christians and the charges placed against them had not been disclosed. According to local sources, pressure against Christians has increased in recent months, resulting in the detention of approximately 50 believers across the country.

Two Christians released in China

Beijing: Delayed reports say that two Christians were released early from detention for medical reasons in November, 2008.

On November 25, Wang Weiliang was released one year early from a three-year sentence he received for protesting the destruction of a church building in Zhejiang province in July 2006.

At the time of the report, Weiliang was receiving care at a hospital in Hangzhou, Zhejiang province. Pastor Zhu Baoguo, a house church leader who was sentenced to one year "re-education through labour" on October 30, 2008 was also released on December 2 for medical reasons.

Pastor fined, restrictions imposed

Almaty (Kazakhstan): Aleksandr Kerker, a Baptist pastor in the town of Tayinsha, North Kazakhstan Region, is facing opposition from authorities for refusing to pay a fine for leading worship without state permission.

In early January, court bailiffs went to Pastor Kerker's employer and demanded he hand over part of Kerker's salary to pay the fine. The employer refused, but fired Kerker to avoid further confrontations. The court bailiffs have also threatened to

confiscate Pastor Kerker's cow and his fridge and stove to cover the owed amount.

Meanwhile, President Nursultan Nazarbaev has sent the draft religion law to be reviewed by the Constitutional Council. The Council has one month to determine if the law conforms to the country's constitution. The repressive religion law proposes a ban of unregistered religious activity, stringent rules on who can spread their faith, and the censorship of religious literature

Believers harrassed in Kazakhstan

Almaty (Kazakhstan): Two months after a police and National Security Committee secret police raid on a Protestant church in southwestern Kazakhstan, church leader Indira Bukharbaeva has been acquitted of administrative charges for leading an unregistered religious organization.

In the country's Kyzylorda region, church members were filmed during the raid. Prosecutors attempted to punish Bukharbaeva for leading a small house church in the town of Aral which had earlier been refused state registration. But on December 4, 2008, the Judge of Aral's

Administrative Court acquitted her.

When the church asked Aral's Justice Department for registration it refused, referring to the new Religion law which would soon enter into force. A more restrictive new Religion Law, which would for the first time explicitly ban all unregistered religious activity, has already passed both chambers of the Kazakh parliament and has been sent to President Nursultan Nazarbaev for signature.

The law has been heavily criticized by many of religious communities who fear even tighter restrictions if the law is enacted.

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