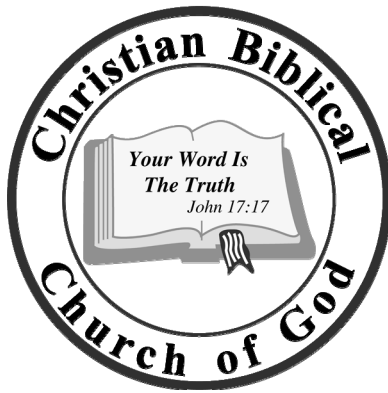


# *What Happens to The Dead?*



*by  
Duncan MacLeod*

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Christian Biblical Church of God  
P.O. Box 1442  
Hollister, CA 95024-1442

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# What Happens To The Dead?

*By Duncan MacLeod*

Billions of people today, and more billions throughout history, have never had the slightest chance for salvation! Most have never even heard uttered in their ears the **phonetic sound** of the name of Jesus Christ—the name which the Bible says is the “**only name under heaven** by which man may be saved.” Many others have heard, or heard of, the tenets of Christianity and the Bible, but never truly had their minds opened to understand. Chances are, you have known more than one such person, some of whom have died in a “lost” state. What happens to such people when they die?

There are those who insist on telling you that such people are sent immediately at death to an ever-burning hell and will burn forever, but never burn up. That is what most mainstream “Christianity” teaches. (No wonder thinking skeptics and atheists want no part of this version of “God.”)

## Is the Soul Immortal?

But does the Bible teach such an outrageous idea? Most people assume it does, because it is what professing Christianity teaches. The fact is, however, that mainstream Christianity as a whole does not even claim to get its beliefs from the Bible alone. The idea of the “immortal soul” **does not come from the Bible**. If you believe the Bible is the Word of God and the only reliable source of knowledge about Him, then the question is “What does the **Bible** teach?”

Nearly all religious leaders persist in teaching the immortality of the soul, despite the fact that the Bible teaches the exact opposite—that the human soul is **mortal**. It can and does DIE. **God alone** has immortality (I Tim. 6:15, 16).

The immortal soul fiction can be traced back to ancient Babylonian mythology, which in various altered forms spread through the civilized world, eventually centering in Egypt in the third and second millennia BCE. Greek mythology came mostly from Egypt, and its gods were simply the old Egyptian ones under different names. In the so-called “Golden Age” of Greek civilization, belief in gods gradually was overlaid with a body of philosophy promoted by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. A major part of Platonic philosophy was based on the supposed dualistic nature of man—the old idea of an immortal soul trapped inside a material body.

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In the fourth century BCE, Plato's disciple Aristotle served as teacher to the young prince Alexander, later to be known as Alexander the Great, who conquered the Persian Empire and the rest of the "known world." Through this conquest, Alexander spread the Hellenistic Greek philosophical teaching everywhere. The teaching is that the inner person is actually an "immortal soul" that originated in the heavens and came down to be trapped inside a material, physical body. For Plato, the only true and pure reality is the heavenly; the material is temporary and essentially evil, and is at best only a faulty reflection of the heavenly. The hope of the "spiritual man" is that his immortal soul can return to heaven at the death of the material body. The idea is that soul and body are two irreconcilably different things and are perpetually at odds with each other. Somehow, at the death of the body, the consciousness of the soul continues right on—now in a different place.

A very few of the earliest church fathers discerned the falsehood of this doctrine, which had already begun to creep into the teaching of some leaders. Justin Martyr (c100-167 CE) had thoroughly studied both Old and New Testament scriptures and could quote extensive passages from memory. In an extended dialogue with a learned Jewish Rabbi, he states, "If you have fallen in with some who are called Christians...and who say there is no resurrection of the dead, but that their souls, when they die, are taken to heaven; do not imagine that they are Christians..." (Justin, *Dialogue With Trypho*, LXXX, found at [www.earlychristianwritings.com](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com)). Many early "church fathers," however, (**not** including the apostles or any other writers of the Bible) had been brought up believing ideas like the immortal soul before becoming "Christian," and through their highly influential writings eventually infused these doctrines into teachings of the Roman church. The Protestant Reformation, while it did cleanse out some errors, continued to perpetuate the "immortal soul" heresy underlying Protestant as well as Catholic doctrine.

### **Why Does It Matter?**

The idea of the soul being immortal and living beyond the death of the body is such a pernicious heresy, because it enables belief in almost every false religion ever devised to deceive and control entire populations. Churches have used it to get people to worship dead "saints" instead of God, and to get them to try to buy people's way into heaven, thus filling church coffers beyond all legitimate need.

The immortal soul idea can be found also in many abominable occult practices such as necromancy—the attempt to contact the spirits of departed loved ones. Thousands of people have been given false

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hopes and bilked out of their hard-earned money by charlatans who claimed to be conducting séances. If anything supernatural actually happened at such events, the “spirits” so contacted were not those of any dead human beings, but probably demons!

Currently, fanatical activist types in the Middle East have been promised that their immortal soul will go to heaven and be attended by many virgins if they blow themselves up in a crowd and kill as many innocent civilians as possible. One wonders whether they’d be as willing to do this if they knew their soul was not immortal, and they would simply be dead afterwards—eventually to face the judgment of God!

### **“Soul” According to the Bible**

What the Bible says about the soul requires some study. The Hebrew word translated “soul” is *nephesh*, defined as “a *breathing* creature, i.e. animal or (abstract) *vitality*; used very widely in a literal, accommodated or figurative sense (bodily or mental) ...” (*Strong’s Exhaustive Concordance of The Bible*, Hebrew Lexicon, item 5315—some abbreviations spelled out) The key concept portrayed behind the diverse uses of the Hebrew *nephesh* is physical **life** of breathing creatures, including living human beings. Far from being separate from the physical body, the soul is inextricably fused with it.

In the first chapter of Genesis, when God created Adam, He made **him**—not just his body—“of the dust of the ground,” and “he became a living soul” (Heb. *nephesh*). Notice it does not say Adam “received a soul,” but that he **became** one. The soul is what a person IS—not something he “has.” It’s the complete package of everything one is, both physical and nonphysical.

Can a soul die, then? In Ezekiel 18:4, we read, “The soul [*nephesh*] that sinneth, it [not just the body] shall die.” For emphasis, the sentence is repeated in verse 20. Some like to cite where Jesus Christ said in Matthew 10:28, “Fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul.” But they fail to read what He said right afterward in the same verse: “But rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell [Greek *gehenna*].” Notice, He did NOT say the fire burns the soul for eternity, but that it DESTROYS the soul – burns it up, causes it to cease to exist. Christ made it clear that the soul is NOT immortal. It has no life or consciousness apart from the body.

### **Confusing Soul With Spirit**

Much of the misunderstanding of the Bible’s teaching may be traceable to the fact that the Bible does say a human being has a spirit.

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The Hebrew word translated “spirit” is *ruach*, which in some places is also translated “breath.” Job’s young friend Elihu says there is a spirit in man, and that God’s Holy Spirit adds understanding to that human spirit (Job 32:8). After listening politely while Job’s three other friends proffered opinions as to why he was in such agony, Elihu said his human spirit was bursting with the matter and was urging him to speak up.

Several passages in Proverbs refer to a man’s spirit (Prov. 15:13; 16:32; 20:27; 25:28). This inner spirit, which we all have, is **not** a being in addition to us, or an “immortal soul” trapped inside of us. It is a non-physical dimension that God gives to each of us at conception that makes us human (Is. 42:5; Zech. 12:1). Having this human spirit added to our brain, we now have a conscious mind, with which we are able to learn human subjects such as language, mathematics and design (I Cor. 2:11).

Our human spirit is our consciousness and inward self-identity. It is the aggregate of everything non-physical inside us—thoughts, imaginations, plans, hopes, dreams, feelings, emotions, attitudes—that makes us each who and what we are. In some ways, it is like a highly detailed design pattern or template, which at death returns to God (Ecc.12:7)—and by which He can resurrect us back to physical life (identical to who and what we were before) or, if we had the Holy Spirit at death, to spirit life.

When the spirit of man is added to the living human body and brain, the whole physical/spiritual package constitutes the person—the soul. The whole person then IS—not “has”—a soul. Neither the soul nor the human spirit retains any consciousness after death (Psalm 146:4).

Paul says that at when God calls us our spirit is infused with and informed by God’s Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:16). This working of God’s Spirit with our human spirit is the only way we can come to understand the things of God and come to conversion (I Cor. 2:11). Those who have received God’s Holy Spirit added to their human spirit in this life become at death the “dead in Christ.”

### **Death According to the Bible**

What the Bible teaches about death and the state of the dead is quite clear. But Churchianity would have us believe that death is little more than the death of the body, while the “immortal soul” goes to one **place** or another, still retaining **consciousness**. The Bible in fact teaches that the difference between being alive and being dead is not a matter of place or location. It’s a matter of being in one **state** or condition or another. The two states—the two choices—are being alive (conscious) or

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being dead (not conscious). Death is the total cessation of life, including consciousness.

The Bible pictures two basic stages a person goes through after dying:

- being *dead*, with no consciousness
- being *resurrected* (brought back to conscious life)

Several scriptures describe what it's like to be dead:

The death of humans is just like that of animals (Ecclesiastes 3:19, 20). The day one dies, the person's thoughts perish—i.e., **all consciousness ceases** (Psalm 146:4). Death is the SAME for ALL people. It is exactly the same for the righteous as for the unrighteous—the same for the faithful as for the unfaithful (Ecc. 9:2). Once dead, a person **knows nothing**—has no consciousness, no awareness of anything (v. 5). For all practical purposes, they have gone entirely into oblivion. They are **not** either looking down from “heaven” or roasting in a “hell” somewhere in the bowels of the earth. They are DEAD, and “dead” means the same thing, whether it refers to an animal, an unconverted person or a converted person.

The Bible does not say anyone goes to heaven. On the contrary, Jesus Christ—the very author of our Christian faith, whose words ought to carry far more weight than those of any would-be religious leader—stated emphatically, “No man hath ascended up to heaven...” (John 3:13). The apostle Peter (**after** the death and resurrection of Christ) adds, “David is not ascended into the heavens” (Acts 2:34).

What? David, a “man after God's own heart” (I Samuel 13:14), not in heaven? Many would assume that if he's not in heaven, then he must be in hell, because according to the human leaders of mainstream Christianity, those are the only two choices.

The fact is, David, like all other dead people, is DEAD. And “dead” means DEAD—not alive in one place or another—DEAD. Again, the question is not one of place, but of state or condition. Hebrews 9:27 tells us that it is appointed to ALL to die once. This first death and lying dead for centuries is neither a reward nor a punishment. It is simply part of what happens to everyone. In David's case, because he died “in the faith,” David will—in the FUTURE—receive the reward of the faithful. For now, however, like Job and like all the rest of the dead true saints, he is simply dead—waiting in his grave for the resurrection.

## What About Purgatory?

There is an apparent third alternative place the soul of the dead may go, according to some religious teachers—based on the “immortal soul”

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idea. It's called "Purgatory," a place where people through suffering and anguish over long periods of time finally get their sins purged out, after which they can then go on to heaven. One of the best-known descriptions of what purgatory is supposedly like can be found in *The Divine Comedy*, by a Medieval author named Dante Alighieri. This description, plus Dante's lurid verbal pictures of the various compartments of hell, seems to have been adopted into Catholicism, even though Dante was by no means a pro-Catholic writer. (He had more than one dead Pope in hell!) In his *Divine Comedy*, Dante has as the reader's guide through these compartments of hell, purgatory and finally heaven the pagan poet Virgil! In any case, the Bible is devoid of any reference to the mythical Purgatory.

The idea of a "purgatory" denies the effectiveness of the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of sins. If a person is truly converted—has repented of his sins and accepted Christ as his savior—then his sins are NOW totally and completely forgiven. He does not have to undergo **any** punishment for them—now or after death. To tell people that they must still suffer after death for their sins, even if they have accepted Christ's sacrifice, borders on blasphemy!

### **Resurrection: The True Hope of a Christian**

Job asks the question in Job 14:14, "If a man die, shall he live again?" Then he answers it: "All the days of my appointed time will I **wait** till my **change** come. Thou shalt call, and I will answer thee: thou wilt have a desire to the works of thine hands." The change does **not** occur right at death. Job knew he would WAIT in the grave an indeterminate period of time before God—in the FUTURE—calls him out of the grave to his reward—a CHANGE in his state from being dead to being alive.

Again, we must look to the words of Jesus Christ, not those of human church leaders. The most quoted verse of the Bible may also be one of its least understood: John 3:16 "For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him should not ..." go to hell but go to heaven? Is that what your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ said? It is **not**, is it?

The choice Christ clearly pictures in this passage is **not** between living forever in a horrible place and living forever in a good place. The choice is between to **perish** (which means to totally cease to exist) and to live forever. The location isn't the issue. He says they who believe in Him should not "... perish, but have everlasting life." The question, then, is whether you live forever **at all**, on the one hand; or go into total, permanent **oblivion**, on the other. Those are the two choices



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the Bible offers. But those who have died up to now—whether in the faith or out of it—are simply dead. They have no consciousness or awareness at present. Their ultimate fate is still in the **future**.

In the Book of Acts and throughout the epistles, Paul and the other apostles characterize the Christian hope as being **resurrected from the dead**. Paul says he was brought into judgment for teaching this truth (Acts 23:6; 24:15) In the whole fifteenth chapter of I Corinthians, Paul makes clear that to believe Christ was resurrected yet not believe in the future resurrection of the saints is incompatible. He explains clearly how it will work (I Cor. 15ff). He gives more detail of it in I Thessalonians (I Thes. 4:13-16).

Jesus Christ said repeatedly regarding the resurrection of the true Christian, "...and I will raise him up **at the last day**" (John 6:39, 40, 44, 54; 11:24).

When does God make His final decision whether a person lives forever or perishes? Has God already made that decision at the time of a person's death? For some, He has; but for the majority, He has not yet. Just as not all are called to conversion and God's grace at the same time, so (and for that very reason) not all receive their judgment at the same time. We must remember that dying and being dead (the first death) are neither reward nor punishment. They are simply part of what happens to us all.

### **The Only Day of Salvation?**

There is an assumption implicit in the teaching of mainstream Christian preachers that if a person doesn't "get saved" now—in this life—that he or she is lost forever. As sincere and well meaning as these teachers may be, they are simply in error if they believe that. The Bible DOES NOT teach the idea that this life is the only time in which people may be saved!

It's important to understand something seldom acknowledged by the world's religious leaders. The apostle Paul clearly wrote that the "god of this world" today is Satan the Devil (II Corinthians 4:4; Revelation 12:9). Religious leaders under his sway have truly created gods in their own image. There is indeed a false religion of some kind or other to satisfy every different type of mind and temperament. Under Satan's sway also, each region and each ethnic entity has built up culture and tradition, in which most people are so steeped that they cannot possibly understand the true God, or be willing to follow His Way even if they did understand. This is why, as the apostle Paul says, God has "concluded them all in unbelief, that He might have mercy on them all (Romans 11:32)."

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Add to all that the fact that the natural human mind simply lacks the capacity or even the desire to understand spiritual truth (I Cor. 2:11, 14). Only if God by His spirit “calls” a person—that is, **opens** the naturally closed mind of an individual and imparts understanding of His truth—does that person come to repentance and conversion in this life (I Cor. 2:9-11; John 6:44; Rom. 2:4; Phil. 2:13). Christ told His disciples such a calling has NOT been extended to most people in this life.

They asked Him why He spoke to the masses in parables. He clearly said to them, "Because it has been given to you to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given.... For this reason I speak to them in parables, because seeing, they see not; and hearing, they hear not; neither do they understand. And in them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah, which says, ‘In hearing you shall hear, and in no way understand; and in seeing you shall see and in no way perceive; For the heart of this people has grown fat, and their ears are dull of hearing, and their eyes they have closed; lest they should see with their eyes, and should hear with their ears, and should understand with their hearts, and should be converted, and I should heal them’ ” (Matt. 13:11-15).

A thorough reading of verses 11-15 above reveals that God has not called all people to salvation in this first life. Until now, only a tiny minority of all humankind have had the calling of God in this life, much less come to conversion and received God’s Holy Spirit. These few—this “little flock,” as Christ refers to His true Church—constitute the “house of God.” Peter tells us that now, in this life, is the time that judgment must begin at the house of God (I Pet. 4:17). Thus, by the time a converted person dies “in the faith,” or “in Christ,” their judgment by God has taken place in this life. God has made the final decision already that he or she is going into His Kingdom. He has written that name in the “Book of Life.” (If this were not true, the dead in Christ could not be referred to as the dead “in Christ”—I Thessalonians 4:16.)

There may be some others for whom the final judgment has already been made as to whether they receive eternal life: those who have committed the unpardonable sin. These people (if there are any, and only God knows if there are) have—with full knowledge and understanding of the truth about God and the way to salvation—rejected God’s grace and forgiveness and chosen not to repent and turn from the way of sin to God’s way. In every era, there can potentially be some who make this eternally fatal decision. For them, only the lake of fire awaits. These are now (if dead) still in their graves awaiting their resurrection (John 5:28, 29; Heb. 10:26, 27).

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### **“At The Last Day”**

Do the dead in Christ go into the Kingdom immediately at the moment of death? Absolutely not. Countless scriptures picture the dead in Christ as **in their graves** UNTIL He raises them up “at the last day” (Job 14:14; John 5:25; 6:39, 40, 44, 54; I Thessalonians 4:13-16; I Corinthians 15:50-54; Matthew 24:30, 31; Revelation 20:4-6). They are now **dead** in their graves until the return of Jesus Christ to the earth. At that time He will raise them to eternal life in a supernatural, spirit state and nature to be like Himself (I John 3:1, 2; Phil. 3:21; II Pet. 1:4; Daniel 12:3).

What about the rest of the dead? They also are now unconscious in their graves—fully dead, not knowing anything. But the decision as to their ultimate fate has not yet been made. Judgment for them has not yet occurred. When does their turn come, then?

### **A Second Resurrection**

Revelation 20:5 tells us that the resurrection of the “dead in Christ” (which occurs at Christ’s second coming) is only the “first resurrection.” It clearly says, “...the **rest of the dead** lived not again until the thousand years were finished.” But they DO LIVE AGAIN! There is a **second resurrection**. In that same chapter, verse 12, we read, “And I saw the dead, small and great, stand before God....” Here we see pictured that “second resurrection:” the resurrection of all those who died NOT in the faith—not having been called and brought to conversion and receipt of God’s grace and His Spirit in their first life. It is those to whom the calling of God was never extended that come before the white throne of Christ pictured here.

As with most other Biblical subjects, the whole story of what happens to these people is not all told in one place. Let us read the entire 37<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of Ezekiel. Here we see the dead of Israel brought back to **physical** life at some time in the future. They are among the “rest of the dead,” the dead NOT in Christ, who appear before God’s throne in Revelation 20:12. How do we know that? Because in verse 4 of that chapter, they are called “the rest of the dead.” “The rest” means ALL OTHERS—all those not in the first resurrection (with the exception of those few if any from this first life who committed the unpardonable sin). The overwhelming majority of dead Israelites will not be among the dead in Christ, obviously. The only other alternative time for their resurrection, as pictured in Ezekiel 37, is the resurrection of the “rest of the dead” to the “white throne judgment” pictured in Rev. 20:12.

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Notice in Ezekiel 37, that after they are brought back to life, God gives them His Holy Spirit! But something has to have happened in between their resurrection and their receipt of the Holy Spirit. Peter says in Acts 2:38 that a requirement for receipt of God's Spirit is repentance of sins. The Israelites apparently will be called before the white throne of Christ, like the rest of humanity, to account for their deeds in this life. Most if not all will come to see what sinners they were, repent of their sins, accept Jesus Christ as their savior, be forgiven for their sins, receive God's grace and His Spirit, then live out the physical life to which they've been resurrected. Isaiah 65:20 seems to indicate that they will have up to 100 years to grow in grace and knowledge and build spiritual character, and then ultimately go on into the Kingdom of God.

Clearly then we see unconverted Israel resurrected in the future; but what about unconverted Gentiles? The ninth through eleventh chapters of Romans show us that God will deal with Gentiles as He deals with Israel. Rev. 20:12 pictures ALL of the "rest of the dead" before the white throne, not just Israel. ALL bow before God and confess their sins. ALL are judged based on their works, and ALL are found guilty of sin (Romans 3:23).

But if we believe **all** of the Bible, it doesn't stop there. II Peter 3:9 tells us that God is not willing that any should perish (be destroyed and miss out on eternal life). After being shown their sins before the throne of God, ALL have their **first** and only chance at repentance, conversion and receipt of the Holy Spirit. Remember, these people NEVER in their first life had their minds opened by the Spirit to the truth about God, nor ever before had the opportunity (with full understanding) to repent of their sins and receive God's grace—for which Jesus Christ died on the cross.

Christ died once for ALL (I Tim. 2:6; Heb. 10:10; I Cor. 15: 22 -24). Our Lord and Savior did not go through the torture, humiliation, scourging and beating He suffered, followed by His agonizing death on the cross—only to have His grace offered to just part of humanity!

Keep in mind that by the time of this "White Throne Judgment" Satan will have been put into the lake of fire and will no longer be able to pervert the truth and deceive humanity. Without Satan's distorting influence, and with their minds now opened by the Holy Spirit, people will for the **first time** be able to see spiritual reality as it truly is. Only those who refuse, AT THAT TIME, to repent and accept Christ as their Savior will go on to the ultimate punishment—the lake of fire pictured in Rev. 20:14.

This lake of fire (Greek word *gehenna*) is a consuming fire that totally destroys the incorrigible wicked. Jesus warned us to fear Him

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who can “**destroy** both soul and body” in this hell fire (Matt.10:28). God tells the faithful in Malachi 4:1-3 of those who go into this fire that He will “burn them up” and that they will become “...ashes under the soles of your feet.” This is permanent death, total destruction of both body and soul, and oblivion for those few who blaspheme the Holy Spirit and knowingly refuse to repent and receive God’s grace and the gift of eternal life. After consuming the incorrigible wicked, the lake of fire apparently will go on to consume the entire earth (I Pet. 3:10; Rev. 21:1).

We can only speculate whether there will be any at all, besides the beast and the false prophet (Rev. 19:20), who are so foolish as to knowingly reject God’s grace and forgiveness. It should be encouraging to realize that, when our unconverted loved ones finally come before the white throne of Christ and answer for their sins, they will have their one and only real chance to repent of them, receive God’s love and grace and have those sins forgiven.

Every human being has a **choice** whether to repent of sin and accept the gift of eternal life or not. God does not force anyone to accept His grace. Can you picture anyone rejecting God’s grace and knowingly choosing a fiery death—total destruction—from which there will be no resurrection? It must be possible, because the Bible says it can happen. Hopefully, there will be very few who make such an eternally fatal choice. The Bible is full of prophecies that sound like all, or nearly all, of humanity ultimately receives salvation—just some at different times from others (I Cor. 15: 22-24).

## *Notes*

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***Christian Biblical Church of God Offices:***

***Australia***

Biblical Truth Ministries  
GPO 1574  
Sydney 2001  
Australia

***Canada***

Post Office Box 125  
Brockville, Ontario K6V 5V2  
Canada

***New Zealand***

Post Office Box 242  
Waihi 2981  
New Zealand

***Republic of South Africa***

Post Office Box 2624  
Wilrow Park  
1731  
Rep. of South Africa

***United Kingdom***

Post Office Box 8224  
Witham CM8 1WZ  
United Kingdom

***United States***

Post Office Box 1442  
Hollister, California 95024-1442

[www.cbcbg.org](http://www.cbcbg.org)  
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