

Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you
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Revival, The Cross and The Narrow Gate

by Bob DeWaay

“Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide, and the way is broad that leads to destruction, and many are those who enter by it. For the gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life, and few are those who find it.” (Matthew 7:13,14)

“And He was saying to them all, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.’” (Luke 9:23)

And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, “Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved.” (Romans 9:27)

Rarely does a week go by that I do not hear or read of the latest “great move of God that is going to win the world for Christ and usher in the great revival that will happen before the return of Christ.” Sometimes it is a new revival, sometimes a new church growth strategy, sometimes a supposed “anointed” man of God who will make Christianity the predominant force in society. Is it now, it is asked, that there will be a massive, world-wide revival that will make Christianity the predominant belief and way of life throughout the world?

The Bible Predicts False Spirituality

It may surprise many to find out that the Bible predicts just the opposite: *“Let no one in any way deceive you, for it [the day of the Lord] will not come*

unless the apostasy comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of destruction” (2Thessalonians 2:3). There are many verses in the New Testament that predict deception and a false spirituality that will claim to be from Christ, but will not. Consider what Jesus said about the end times: *“Then if anyone says to you, ‘Behold, here is the Christ’ or ‘There He is,’ do not believe him. For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect” (Matthew 24:23,24).* Since “Christ” is an English transliteration of the Greek word *christos*, which means “anointed,” when someone says, “here is the anointed one” he or she is saying the same thing as “here is the Christ.”¹ There is no difference, the Christ is the anointed one. Today there are many claimed “anointed ones” presenting themselves as God’s mouthpieces.

The Bible predicts a “revival” of false and deceptive spirituality that will come upon the Earth just prior to the return of Christ. Consider these verses:

But realize this, that in the last days difficult times will come. . . . And just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses, so these men also oppose the truth, men of depraved mind, rejected as regards the faith. . . . And indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. But evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. (2 Timothy 3:1,8,12,13).

This agrees with Jesus’ prophecy, but hardly fits the glowing claims of modern day revivalists. The Bible predicts massive deception that is laden with false signs and wonders that will characterize the last days before Christ’s return. The proponents of a supposed

world-wide revival (that they say will cause the masses to become Christian just before Christ returns) have no Biblical basis for their lavish claims. Dave Hunt comments, “The false prophets to whom Christ refers will use their signs and wonders to support their false teaching that revival, not apostasy, is underway.”²

Underlying the two opposite teachings about the end times lies a different understanding of the nature of the church. The revivalists tend to see the church as masses of professing Christians who can be enticed into a more enthusiastic stance toward Christianity during exciting times of revival. Yet Jesus said that many would claim to have done miracles in His name and prophesied in His name, yet He never knew them (Matthew 7:22,23). Jesus’ own popularity with the masses was brought to an end, first with His teaching about the cross, and then with the event of His crucifixion (see John 6, particularly vs. 66). There were masses who were attracted by the miracles but offended by the cross. They loved signs and wonders, but rejected the only means by which they could be saved, the cross of Jesus Christ (see 1Corinthians 1:22-24).

The other understanding of the church is that it consists of those who are called by God and accept the “scandal” (1Corinthians 1:23 translated “*stumbling block*”) of the cross. They are those who enter the narrow gate and walk the narrow path, no matter how few join them. Jesus asked, “However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find [lit ‘the’] faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8b). This hardly sounds like most of the world will be Christian before Christ returns. The church consists of the “called out ones” (the literal meaning of the term “church” from the Greek). They are the remnant, the ones who are the recipients of God’s gracious act of salvation through Christ and His cross.

Christ Stops a “Revival”

It is true that signs attract the

masses. “*And a great multitude was following Him, because they were seeing the signs which He was performing on those who were sick*” (John 6:2). It is not true, however, that the masses thereby become the true disciples of Jesus Christ. In John 6:5-13 we read of Jesus feeding the five thousand. The result of the miracle was a certain superficial “faith” in those who saw the previous signs and now the miracle of the bread, “*When therefore the people saw the sign which He had performed, they said, ‘This is of a truth the Prophet who is to come into the world’*” (John 6:14). They correctly identified Jesus as the One about whom Moses prophesied, (Deuteronomy 18:15). So far so good.

However, there was a huge problem with this multitude of new “believ-

“The cross has always been a scandal for those seeking signs.”

ers.” They wanted a king without a cross. “*Jesus therefore perceiving that they were intending to come and take Him by force, to make Him king, withdrew again to the mountain by Himself alone*” (John 6:15). Jesus left them behind, or at least tried to. After some intervening events, including Jesus walking on the water (John 6:19), the multitudes managed to find Him on the other side of the Sea of Galilee (John 6:24,25). An amazing dialogue ensued between Jesus and the people who previously recognized Him as the coming prophet and also wanted Him to be king. Jesus rebuked their wrong motives (verse 26), told them to work for food which He would give them that “*endures to eternal life, (verse 27)*,” and then explained the nature of the work He had in mind: “*This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent*” (John 6:29b).

Here it is important to understand that believing in Christ is more than mere mental assent to His existence. They had already expressed faith that He was the Prophet that God had promised. Faith in the Biblical sense

means putting one’s complete trust in God, relationally. This includes accepting and abiding by His word (see John 8:31,32). This turns out to be what these revival seekers would not do. After witnessing great miracles of healing, and after seeing Jesus multiply the bread, they had not yet satisfied their lust for signs. They wanted more: “*They said therefore to Him, ‘What then do You do for a sign, that we may see, and believe You? What work do You perform?’*” (John 6:30). They were still thinking about bread and mentioned that Moses had given them manna (verse 31). This led to Jesus’ claim that He is the true bread that comes down from heaven: “*Jesus said to them, ‘I am the bread of life; he who comes to Me shall not hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst’*” (John 6:35).

Ironically, this claim of Jesus that He is the proper object of ones faith, hope and desire would be the thing that dispersed the multitude. He presented His flesh and blood as the “food” that was necessary to partake of eternal life and resurrection on the last day (read John 6:35-65 for the whole dialogue). This promptly ended the “revival.” As a result, the masses who were attracted by the signs and wonders were whittled down to a small remnant of faith, those who were willing to accept the seemingly scandalous teaching of Jesus. The cross has always been a scandal for those seeking signs. “*As a result of this many of His disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him anymore. Jesus said therefore to the twelve, ‘You do not want to go away also, do you?’ Simon Peter answered Him, ‘Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life’*” (John 6:66-68).

Earlier in John, Jesus commented about those who seek signs, “*Jesus therefore said to him, ‘Unless you people see signs and wonders, you simply will not believe’*” (John 4:48). This attitude was not good. Yet, has anything changed today? Are those who get on airplanes and fly to the latest hot spot, seeking signs, willing to embrace the

scandalous message of the cross and serve Christ on His terms? Some may, but many will not.

Revival in Asia Minor during Paul’s Ministry

Even those who sought signs and wonders during the time of the Paul’s ministry in the book of Acts did not thereby become committed disciples of Christ. For example, “*And this took place for two years, so that all who lived in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. And God was performing extraordinary miracles by the hands of Paul, so that handkerchiefs or aprons were even carried from his body to the sick, and the diseases left them and the evil spirits went out*” (Acts 19:10-12). This was great. Many repented and even got rid of their occult books (Acts 19:18,19). This was quite a revival, it even affected the silver trade in Ephesus because so many turned from pagan idolatry (Acts 19:27). We know that Paul’s teaching and preaching was Biblical, so this revival was certainly far superior than what we commonly see today, often characterized by the most shallow teaching. **Yet even in this apostolic, Biblical, and godly situation, the result was not a “Christian” Ephesus!** All those attracted to revivals do not turn out to be the true people of God.

The people in Asia who heard the word of God, saw signs and wonders, and repented of their idolatry would later turn away from Paul and his message. Later in his ministry Paul wrote to Timothy, “*You are aware of the fact that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes*” (2Timothy 1:15). This was the very site of the previous “revival.” What a sorry testimony about those who had flocked to Paul’s ministry! Paul had predicted this in a warning to the Ephesian elders at the end of his ministry there. “*I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them*” (Acts 20:29,30). And so it

happened. What was left was a smaller flock of those willing to embrace the “*whole purpose of God*” (**Acts 20:27b**).

The signs that God worked during through Paul were true signs that verified the message he preached. His message was Christ and the resurrection. The end times, however, will be characterized by **false** signs. This does not mean that they do not really happen. It means that they happen in the context of a false message or false messenger. If the true signs that happened during the first century did not create a situation where the masses of people truly became devoted followers of Christ, how are the false signs at the end of the age going to do so? Clearly they will not.

We have seen that in the ministry of Jesus before His crucifixion, and in that of Paul after Pentecost, signs and wonders produced the same results. There were multitudes who initially and enthusiastically responded, who later upon being faced with the true nature of the cross and the call to discipleship left and had nothing more to do with true faith in God. In fact, throughout church history the ebbs and flows of people rushing into and out of the visible church does not change the fact that God’s chosen ones are the few who enter the narrow gate and walk the narrow path. The cross is always a scandal and the true people of God are always a “remnant.” In this context we can understand the predictions of Jesus and Paul that the end times will be characterized by apostasy, not revival. In fact, I think that much of what is called “revival” is actually apostasy dressed in religious garb. Did not Paul predict that it would be from among our own selves that the wolves would arise?

When Faith in God is Popular

At times in history, faith is popular and God’s laws are accepted and partially followed by the masses. This happened in Israel’s history. Yet soon things change and persecution, bad leadership, or calamity cause mass “back-sliding” and evil times come.

The history of the Kings in the Old Testament follows this pattern. During the “good times” the masses may give mental assent to God’s laws and express superficial belief in His existence. Some claim this as revival. I propose a different explanation. The true people of faith are always a minority when compared to the masses of people, either in ancient Israel (as Paul asserted in **Romans 9:27**) or in our day among all the citizens of a country. When faith in God is easy, popular, and supported by the political leadership, many give assent to it, even though they are unregenerate. Persecution and hard times prove their faith to be in man and not God, so they fall away.³

This happened in the persecutions of the church in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. Christians were ordered to curse Christ, burn incense to the pagan gods, and do religious acts before an image of the emperor, under threat of their lives.⁴ The Romans were convinced that true Christians would not do this, and they were right. They did not want to kill people who simply attended Christian services, associated with Christians, or appeared to be Christians but were not. Many who were truly devoted to their Lord Jesus Christ refused to curse Him. During these times the numbers of professing Christians was much smaller than it would later be when Constantine institutionalized Christianity in the Roman Empire. Yet many were willing to pay with their lives to maintain their public confession of Christ.

A marvelous example of faithfulness and courage in persecution is found *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*. The elderly Polycarp, who as youth had known the apostle John, was arrested and brought before the Romans. Here is part of the account: “Then, the proconsul urging him, and saying, ‘Swear [by the fortune of Caesar], and I will set thee at liberty, reproach Christ;’ Polycarp declared, ‘Eighty and six years have I served Him, and He never did me any injury: how then can I blaspheme my King and my Savior?’”⁵

But what are we to make of events nearly two hundred years later after Constantine “Christianized” Rome? Multitudes flooded into churches. Were the majority of pagan Romans now “Christian”? God knows the heart, but it is a dangerous assumption to imagine that when social prestige, popularity, prosperity, and other amenities attend one’s “faith” that people who come are truly God’s elect. In fact, some Christians who had endured the persecutions saw so much danger in the newly popularized church that they fled to the wilderness to avoid corruption.⁶ A church historian writes, “The narrow gate of which Jesus had spoken had become so wide that countless multitudes were hurrying past it — some seemingly after privilege and position, without caring to delve too deeply into the meaning of Christian baptism and life under the cross.”⁷

When the multitudes are coming, one wonders if the offense of the cross is being fully understood. “*And He was saying to them all, ‘If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me’*” (**Luke 9:23**). I am not claiming that no one is doing this, just that the remnant idea is still valid today. There is more to truly following Christ than following popular religious trends that may go under the banner “Christian.” No matter how wide it appears to be, the gate is still as narrow as it was when Jesus told us about it. Few still walk on the narrow path.

The Ultimate Success of the Gospel

One nagging question is how the purposes of God shall come to pass if there are relatively few that enter the narrow gate. Proponents of “end times revival” call views such as I am espousing, “eschatological pessimism.” In other words, if the masses of the world do not become Christianized, then God’s plan through the gospel has failed, or we have failed to properly execute the plan.

However, we may rest assured that the Bible never views things this way.

God's plan did not "fail" because only two of the individuals who left Egypt during the exodus actually entered the promised land. God's plan did not "fail" because Noah and his family were the only survivors of the flood. The remnant through whom God works are those who have received the promises and place complete faith and trust in God. Remember the verse Paul cited to prove this: "*And Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, 'Though the number of the sons of Israel be as the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved'*" (**Romans 9:27**). The idea is that God promised Abraham a multitude of descendants, but did not thereby promise that every one of them would be saved (Paul says this in **Romans 9:6-8**). For example, if everyone who physically descended from Abraham was saved, then Saul, Absalom, and every wicked king and idolater that ever lived in Israel would be saved.

Jesus taught about the end of the age, "*And because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold. But the one who endures to the end, he shall be saved. And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come*" (**Matthew 24:12-14**). This is clearly compatible with His teaching about the narrow gate. I do not think it appropriate to call it "pessimistic." God's purposes in calling forth the elect through the preaching of the gospel to all the nations of the world must and will succeed. Neither the whole nor the majority of those in these nations have to be saved for God's promises to be fulfilled any more than all of the Jews throughout history have to be saved for God's promises to Abraham to be valid. Jesus said that the preaching to the whole world is for "*a witness to all the nations.*" This means hearing about the cross of Christ and being confronted with the only means of salvation. It obviously does not have to meet with universal acceptance to be valid. Some or most people may in fact reject it. Nevertheless, the gospel cannot fail in its mission.

Our responsibility is laid out in the Great Commission, "*Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.*" (**Matthew 28:19,20**). The imperative in these verses in the Greek is "*make disciples!*" Robert D. Culver points out that baptizing and teaching gain imperative force from their relationship to the imperative command to make disciples.⁸ None of this requires the type of "revival" mentality that many today promote. In some cases, the content of the message is so diluted that it could hardly be said that people are being taught "all that I [Christ] commanded."

Conclusion

Christ promised that false prophets and false signs and wonders would characterize the end times. Paul predicted a great apostasy. However, God has done signs and wonders to confirm His word in the past and He can do so today if He so wills. So, how are we to distinguish the true from the false? The acid test is the content of the message preached. At least the following must be true: all teaching must be Biblical and must clearly define the uniqueness of the person of Christ. This must include the cross — both the historical facts of the death burial and resurrection of Christ as a substitutionary atonement and that saving faith in Christ includes embracing the implications of the cross in one's own life. If this type of preaching and teaching is consistently practiced, we can be sure that God will use it to call forth His people out of the fallen world and into true relationship with Himself. This is the nature of the narrow gate and narrow path.

If, however, a claimed revival has anything and everything else: hype, excitement, signs and wonders, masses of followers, testimony of people changing their behavior, or whatever else might attend such a revival, even if otherwise praiseworthy, such a revival has no validity if the message of

the cross is absent. Jesus saw as a temptation from Satan the popularity that came from the multitudes who were willing to follow Him as long as he said nothing about the cross. Thus He rebuked Peter, "*Get behind Me, Satan; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's.*" (**Mark 8:33b**). Why? Peter had rebuked Jesus for saying that He "*must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.*" (**Mark 8:31b**). The cross is what narrows the group down to the remnant of faith. That is why it is a Satanic temptation to neglect its preaching or relegate it to something people may find out about later if they bother to enquire. Satan kept tempting Jesus to avoid the cross right up to the time He was dying upon it. They said, "*If You are the King of the Jews, save Yourself!*" (**Luke 23:27**). They would have a king without a cross.

Jesus not only asserted the He must suffer on the cross for the sins of the world, but He pressed the implications home to all who claimed to want to follow him: "*And He summoned the multitude with His disciples, and said to them, 'If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.'*" (**Mark 8:34**). Is it any surprise that in our day where "revival" means revelry and laughter, self love, prosperity, popularity, and many grandiose claims, that the masses are attracted. Absent the cross it is merely end times deception.

End Notes

1. See *Critical Issues Commentary*, Issue #5, "The Anointing and the Christian"
2. Dave Hunt, *The Berean Call*, Oct. 1997. This is an excellent article on this issue. Contact them at P.O. Box 7019; Bend Oregon, 97708.
3. The Parable of the Sower and the Seed shows this — **Luke 8:4-15**.
4. Everett Ferguson, *Backgrounds of Early Christianity*, 1st edition,

(Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1987) 483.

5. *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*
chapt. 9.

6. Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of
Christianity*. (New York:
HarperCollins, 1984) 136,137.

7. Ibid. 136.

8. Robert D. Culver, "What is the
Church's Commission?," Bibliotheca
Sacra, #125 (July 1968) 249.

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Written by Bob DeWaay

Twin City Fellowship

P.O. Box 8068

Minneapolis, MN 55408; © 1997

bob@twincityfellowship.com

612-874-7484

www.twincityfellowship.com/cic
