

Critical Issues Commentary

A Biblically based commentary on current issues that impact you
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The Lure of Paganism

Part 1

by Bob DeWaay

“Be careful to listen to all these words which I command you, in order that it may be well with you and your sons after you forever, for you will be doing what is good and right in the sight of the Lord your God. When the Lord your God cuts off before you the nations which you are going in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, beware that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How do these nations serve their gods, that I also may do likewise?’ You shall not behave thus toward the Lord your God, for every abominable act which the Lord hates they have done for their gods; for they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods. Whatever I command you, you shall be careful to do; you shall not add to nor take away from it.” (Deuteronomy 12:28-32)

“And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.” (Romans 12:2)

The Divine Warning

God warns His people not to allow the pagan world to lure them into its beliefs and practices. From Genesis (e.g. Sodom and Gomorrah) to Revelation (e.g. the great harlot Babylon) we read such warnings. God has called out a people for Himself who continue to live in the midst of the sinful world system from which they came. As strangers and aliens Christians live in a world that wants us back and is very displeased when we do not follow its example. The passage from **Romans 12**

quoted above shows that we need to have renewed minds so that we are transformed into what God intended us to be as His people. Those whose minds remain unrenewed will end up being conformed to the pagan world.

To resist the lure of paganism we need to see it for what it is and how radically it contrasts with Biblical Christianity. The passage from **Deuteronomy 12** contains a warning of dangers Israel would face **after** gaining victory. After their conquest of the promised land, the gods of the pagans would still be a potential snare for God's people. Ironically, it was the enticement of pagan gods that would lead to captivity and loss of sovereignty for Israel. The armies of the nations could not stop the people of God from taking the land He promised them; but the subtle influence of the pagan world was able to so defile their relationship with God that they were defeated and led into captivity. God warned them about this. The way to avert it was to listen carefully to His Word and obey it, not adding to it or subtracting from it. Many did not listen nor obey and the tragic results are recorded in the Old Testament.

The New Testament contains similar warnings, showing us that the temptations that faced Israel face those chosen by God in Christ, both Jew and Gentile. *“You adulteresses, do you not know that friendship with the world is hostility toward God? Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (James 4:4).* James uses strong language, common to the Old Testament prophets, the analogy of adultery. God's people have been bought with a price and are to be the very bride of Christ. Paul used this analogy in his appeal to the Corinthian church: *“For I am jealous for you with a godly jealousy; for I betrothed you to one husband, that to Christ I might present you as a pure*

virgin. But I am afraid, lest as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your minds should be led astray from the simplicity and purity of devotion to Christ” (2Corinthians 11:2,3). The temptation finds its enticing power in the fact that Satan presents the pagan world as something other than the enemy it is.

In the World But Not of It

The New Testament passages that warn us about the temptations of the world use the Greek word *“kosmos.”* A difficulty is presented by the fact that the same word is used in other contexts with different meanings. For example, in **1John 2:15** we are warned: *“Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.”* The Greek word for world in this passage is *“kosmos.”* The same word is found in **John 3:16** which teaches that *“God so loved the world”!* This is confusing if we do not understand the different meanings this word has in different contexts.

Confusion on this point caused me much difficulty early in my Christian walk. I assumed that leaving the world meant isolating oneself from as many common human affairs as possible. This meant staying away from the world of commerce, art, literature, politics, etc. and surrounding oneself only with other Christians. During the mid to late 1970's there were numerous “Christian communities” that sprung up, offering an alternative to a sick world.

Though the motives were good and the Christian fellowship delightful, problems developed. A simplified summary of the problems is that the world came into our Christian fortresses with us. The lust of the flesh, lust of the eyes, and boastful pride of life (see **1John 2:16**) that characterize the world not only exist “out there in the sinful world,” but in the heart of man. Living “by faith” with no salaried job in the “world” did not consequently deliver one from *“the love of money [that] is a root of all sorts of evil”* (1Timothy 6:10). Monasticism in various forms has never succeeded in delivering peo-

ple from the lusts of the flesh (see **Colossians 2:23**). The desert monks of the fourth and fifth centuries who isolated themselves from other humans still found the temptations and spiritual battles to be exceedingly intense.¹

It was while preparing for a Bible class that I found an answer to many questions about this matter. Looking up the word *kosmos* in the Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, I found that the word was used in three distinct ways.² These are: “World I, as the universe, the sum of all created being. . . .³ World II, as the abode of men, the theater of history, the inhabited world . . .,⁴ [and] World III as humanity, fallen creation, the theater of salvation history.”⁵ When the New Testament writers referred to the world in its fallenness and rebellion, as a system permanently opposed to the kingdom of God, they were using the word in the third sense. In many places, however, the word “*kosmos*” was used to designate the “arena of human affairs.” It is in this sense that Christians are deployed on the scene of the fulfillment of the Great Commission.

David Wells offers an excellent discussion of the three usages of *kosmos* in the New Testament and the significance of worldliness.⁶ He differentiates between the second and third meanings of *kosmos*: “(2) the nations, the human community; [and] (3) the ways of fallen humanity, alienated from God and his truth.”⁷ It is in the second sense that as Christians we are in the world and in the third that we are not to be of it. My problem had been that I mistook the second for the third and with great difficulty and finally no success, tried to get out of it. Jesus has us here precisely because we are called to be His witnesses in the human community, the nations (*ethnē*). This of necessity includes involvement in the various arenas of human affairs. It is here Peter’s admonishment finds practical fulfillment: “*Keep your behavior excellent among the Gentiles, so that in the thing in which they slander you as evil-doers, they may on account of your good deeds, as they observe them, glorify God in the day of visitation*” (**1Peter 2:12**).

The Gospel of John uses the term *kosmos* for world in fifty-seven different

verses. John uses it in all of its ranges of meaning to create contrast and irony. For example, consider **John 1:10**: “*He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him.*” He was in the world in the sense of the inhabited earth with its human affairs. He made the world, meaning the whole created universe. Ironically the world did not know Him, i.e. in its fallen and rebellious state it did not know its own Creator!

Consider the following section of Jesus’ high priestly prayer of **John 17**:

But now I come to Thee; and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy made full in themselves. I have given them Thy word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. I do not ask Thee to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. As Thou didst send Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world. (John 17:13-18)

It is from this and similar passages that we get the phrase, “in the world but not of it.” Jesus and those He has chosen are not of the sinful world system whose rebellion is inspired by the “ruler of this world” (**John 14:30**), Satan. Yet the disciples are sent into the world, the arena of human affairs, with His mission to make disciples of all the peoples. That there still is danger is shown by the prayer that they be kept from the evil one.

Living as God’s People

The lure of paganism is to be sucked into the fallen, worldly system of values and unbiblical practices that surrounds us. As Peter said, Christians are slandered as evil doers, though in fact they live exemplary lives (or a least should). This theme is a continuation of one found in the Old Testament. Daniel lived such an exemplary life that, when the pagans were jealous that Daniel was to be appointed to a prominent position, they could find no ground of accusation against him (see **Daniel 6:1-5**). He had been so conscientious in his work in pagan Babylon that they had to trick the

king into making a law against prayer to get Daniel in trouble. This law Daniel disobeyed. We ought to follow Daniel’s example. It will not do to be found poor workers and unreliable in our responsibilities and blame the fact that we are Christians who are not to love the world. The answer for us as it was for Daniel is to pray **and** work hard in the world, as unto God and not men.

The lure of paganism is an attraction created by “gods” who demand no changes in one’s moral behavior, who reward those who go along with the crowd — the multitude on the road of perdition, and who allow self to remain unmolested on the throne of one’s life. David Wells eloquently describes the nature of the “world” in its fallen sense: “The ‘world’ is a godless curia demanding that its teaching be obeyed, rewarding those who acquiesce, exacting sanctions on those who do not, and generally making belief and trust in Christ difficult.”⁸ He also describes how the “self” is tied up in this: “It [the world in its fallen, alienated state] is life characterized by self-righteousness, self-centeredness, self-satisfaction, self-aggrandizement, and self-promotion, with a corresponding distaste for the self-denial proper for union with Christ.”⁹ Daniel proved to be a godly man who would willingly serve in the world system if it were God’s purpose for him, but would rather be cast into the lion’s den than give up prayer.

It is difficult to be in the world but not of it, and the Bible recognizes this. That is why it is filled with warnings about sin and offers of grace to escape temptation. It often seems to us that it would be easier just to be out of it all together or to give in. Recently my teenage son asked me, “Why does God allow Satan to do what he does and have us live in a world full of evil?” Though a most difficult question, I was delighted that he asked, since it shows a godly concern. I told him what I know to be the Biblical answer: “it is for our ultimate good.” I gave this answer knowing that it does not **seem** to be quite satisfactory and would provoke another difficult question — “How does having Satan and evil around us, with people dying and going to hell do any good?”

A frustrating thing about teaching

spiritual things to high schoolers is that they rarely say much and when they do they seem to always ask the questions that are most difficult to answer! The Bible teaches that “all things” including all of the evil that is allowed to exist are under God's sovereign rulership and will result in the greater good of those who are called (**Romans 8:28ff**). That God is ultimately and permanently glorified is the purpose of all existence and we ought not be ashamed of this Biblical answer that may seem inadequate some in our society.

The Church in the World

The sad story of the nominal church has been that what persecution and hatred could not do (get the church to deny her Lord and His ways) success and acceptance has often accomplished. This was the danger Moses foresaw when he warned the children of Israel about the dangers of success. For example, in **Deuteronomy 9:1-6** he warned them not to think that when the nations were driven out of Canaan so that Israel could

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’s own righteousness. Such thinking can be fatal because it can cause God's people to begin to think and act with the same pride that caused the pagans to come under God's judgment.

The last few years I have undertaken an extensive study of the first four hundred years of church history. I have come to the conclusion that the seeming success that was gained at the “conversion” of Constantine (whether he was truly Christian is much debated and the subject of many books) led to a drastic change in the church's self understanding that was ultimately disastrous. When pagan Rome persecuted the church, even martyrdom spread a fervor of devotion to Christ. When Rome became “christianized” the whole nature of the institutional church gradually changed. Horrible consequences such as the corruption of its teaching and morals en-

sued.

The problem of the church taking on the practices of the surrounding culture existed during the writing of the New Testament. For example, the city of Corinth was known as a center of luxury and immorality. “Because of the luxury and vice of Corinth the word ‘corinthianize’ (i.e. to fornicate) was coined as an infamous sign of the wealth and immorality for which the city was renowned in the ancient world.”¹⁰ What did Paul find in the Corinthian church? — fornication and the rich abusing the poor while turning the love feast into a drunken debacle (see **1Corinthians 5:1** and **1Corinthians 11**).

Paul quoted a Cretan poet: “*One of themselves, a prophet of their own, said, ‘Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons’*” (**Titus 1:12**). Paul's response was not, “this is a stereotypical statement, disregard it”! Rather he told Titus who was ministering in Crete, “*This testimony is true. For this cause reprove them severely that they may be sound in the faith*” (**Titus 1:13**). The

prevailing sins of the pagan culture have a way of finding their way into the church. The man of God must Biblically correct these sins and teach people to live God's way. To put it into our situation, “American Christian” should not be allowed to become synonymous with “American” when viewed in regard to the prevailing sins of our culture. Contemporary writers such as Os Guinness and David Wells contend that this has been the case and that we need reformation. We need to listen to them.

The problem is that we easily and naturally consider what we are used to normal. With that is a tendency to not see ourselves objectively. Sometimes Christians from another culture can help in this regard. For example, I find Vishal Mangalwadi's (Vishal is a native of India) critique of the New Age movement as it has influenced Western culture astute and helpful.¹¹ Many of the “new” beliefs of our culture are actually ideas that have been around elsewhere for thousands of years and have failed miser-

ably. Christian ministers who would follow the pattern of the Bible need to identify the worldly influences of the surrounding culture and particularly refute those which are finding their way into the church. It is the stated purpose of this commentary to help with this.

Predictably, twenty years after some new fad has become popular in American society and has nearly run its course, a Christianized version of it will appear and be sold to evangelicals as a new way for the church to be successful. Discernment is imperative because Christ has left us in this world and many things are indeed neutral. For example, the information revolution has radically changed our capabilities of storing and retrieving information, as well as broadcasting it. This is an aspect of the world that we can utilize without sullyng the faith. I use my computer Bible so much that I can hardly imagine how I ever prepared a Bible lesson when I only had the paper version.

However, there are always inherent dangers. For example, many have used new technology to broadcast Christian teaching over the air waves, off of satellites, and through cable TV channels. Some such usages (the John Ankerberg Show comes to mind) have been tremendously helpful and blessed of God. Yet there are perils. During the 1980's we saw several of the most “successful” Christian broadcasters become so intoxicated with power, money, and fame that they went the way of worldly media stars. The scandals of immorality and misused money offended more than whatever truth was broadcast had helped.

To be in the world and not of it includes involvement in the arena of human affairs, including the arena of public debate. Christians, like the Hebrew man of God Daniel, find themselves at times in the centers of power and influence. To use the neutral aspects of the world (world II as defined earlier) and not abuse them, slipping into the thinking and practices of the fallen world (world III) is the necessary task of each of us. It requires a constant renewing of the mind by the Word of God. Paul warned not to be conformed to the world and he knew how real the danger was. Having the oversight of many churches, his greatest sorrow was to learn that some, like the

Galatians, had deserted Him who had called them for a different gospel (**Galatians 1:6**). His greatest joy was Christians like the Philippians who stayed firm in the grace of God and did not stray from the gospel. (**Philippians 1:4-7**)

Even faithful churches like the one at Philippi were warned about the prevailing sins of their surroundings. Philippi was a Roman colony that was a dwelling place of Roman military veterans. They took great pride in being Romans and that their city was a miniature Rome.¹² Paul wrote to the Christians at Philippi about “citizenship” which was their greatest pride:

For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things. For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. (**Philippians 3:18-20**)

The glory of Rome and its citizenship was shameful in many ways, but our heavenly citizenship is truly glorious.

“Give us a King”

Moses predicted that when God's people entered the promised land, they would want a king, but for the wrong reasons. “*When you enter the land which the Lord your God gives you, and you possess it and live in it, and you say, 'I will set a king over me like all the nations who are around me'*” (**Deuteronomy 17:14**). They would want to be like the Canaanites who followed other gods. The prescription that Moses gave to them is a profound precedent that I think does not get enough credit when the history of Western Civilization is taught. The king was to be subject to Biblical law.

Now it shall come about when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself a copy of this law on a scroll in the presence of the Levitical priests. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may

learn to fear the Lord his God, by carefully observing all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted up above his countrymen and that he may not turn aside from the commandment, to the right or the left; in order that he and his sons may continue long in his kingdom in the midst of Israel. (**Deuteronomy 17:18-20**)

The people wanted a king for the wrong reasons. They wanted to be “conformed to this world,” to use Paul's later terminology. God acquiesced to their wrongly motivated desires with warnings about the consequences. The historical account is given in **1Samuel 8:4-20**. The king they would get would mistreat them and take advantage of them. They were warned of this, yet persisted in their demands for a king because, “*there shall be a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations.*” (**1Samuel 8:19b,20a**)

In spite of the people's wrong motives, and the inevitable problems, God sovereignly used their demand for a king for His own purposes and His people's ultimate good. God would raise up David (after their sorry experience with Saul) who would be a man after God's heart and through whom would be the lineage of Messiah. Furthermore, the king was to be submitted to the law of God, and not have the autonomous, legislative power that pagan tyrants commonly exercised. This restraint, written about by Moses thousands of years ago, is a cherished idea in America. Every leader is to be limited by constitutional law.

It sorrows me that when our children study Western Civilization in high school, they learn all about the pagan mythology of the Greeks and Romans, yet are kept in the dark about Moses, Jesus, and Paul. Non-existent pagan demigods are deemed more important in understanding our own history than Moses who gave us God's inspired law! What a travesty and misrepresentation. It is no wonder that paganism is now being given consideration as a serious religion by many in our society. I will write about this in the next issue.

The key thing we need to learn is that God's word and its application in our lives by the Holy Spirit is the necessary, restraining influence to the fallen world system that pulls at us in more ways than we realize. It is a costly thing to stand out and refuse to go along with the tides of our age. We often speak of “peer pressure” as a problem for teenage, Christian young people, but fail to realize that it is just as forceful of an influence on people of all ages. When the ancient Israelites said, “we want to be like the nations” (*goyim* which came to mean “Gentiles” and “heathen” or “pagans” when contrasted with Israel as a covenant community) they were voicing a desire that has tempted God's people to this day. There is a high social price to pay when one dissents. The thunderous voice of the many, the status quo of the world, sounds compelling because of its volume and constant repetition. Those who follow the world are angered to hear a minority report.

For this reason, we cannot afford to be Biblically illiterate. We not only need to know God's Word, we need it authoritatively taught and preached to us. We need to gather as God's flock and discuss the application of Biblical truth to practical matters of life. We need to practice the admonition of **Hebrews 3:13**: “*But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called 'Today,' lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.*” **Romans 12:2** (concerning the choice of conforming to the world or being transformed) is no idle thought. It is a choice that faces us daily. We are either being transformed by God into the image of Christ or we are surely being conformed to the world.

I have spoken about the Biblical issue of resisting the lure of the fallen world system. I have used the term “pagan” in its broadest sense, but have yet to offer a technical definition of the term. I have not yet discussed particular pagan beliefs that are highly influential in our current American culture and how they influence the church. In the next issue I will begin from the Biblical foundation we have discussed in this issue and examine neopaganism and its powerful influence in our contemporary world.

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End Notes

1. see Justo L. Gonzalez, The Story of Christianity, Vol. 1 (HarperCollins: New York, 1984) 138-143 about early desert monasticism.

2. Theological Dictionary of the New Testament; G. Kittel, editor; (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1965) Vol. III, 867-895 under “kosmos.”

3. *ibid.* 884.

4. *ibid.* 888.

5. *ibid.* 889.

6. David F. Wells, God In The Wasteland, (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans: 1994) 37-56.

7. *ibid.* 37.

8. *ibid.* 40

9. *ibid.*

10. Ralph P. Martin, “2Corinthians,” Word Biblical Commentary vol. 40; (Word: Dallas, 1986) xxviii.

11. Vishal Mangalwadi, When the New Age Gets Old, (InterVarsity: Downers Grove, Il., 1992).

12. William Hendriksen, New Testament Commentary. “Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon”; (Baker: Grand Rapids, 1962).

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