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"The Churches of God Outreach Ministries provides leadership, information, and biblical teaching in spreading the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Matthew 28:19-20"

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Who Is On the Lord's Side?

**Jesus tells us that 'few' will find the narrow entrance to eternal life.
How come there are two billion Christians?**

by James McBride

Thousands jam St Peters Square to hear the Pope's Easter message. Multiple millions crowd a variety of church buildings every Sunday. Thousands of 'evangelists' daily proclaim the Christian message and missionaries stride the world. Vast sums are annually poured into its propagation and maintenance. Church fabric, stipends, missionary activity, seminars, convocations - all call for huge financial outlay. The Christian faith is big business. And as the effort is, presumably, in service of the great God - why not? Whole nations claim to be Christian.

Switch on television for a religious service and often as not you will see a deliriously happy crowd at worship. All ages, all colours assembled in worship of the God of the Christian Scriptures. Their expression radiates joy and sincerity. Vast auditoriums overflow with the faithful. There's miraculous healing of the sick. Even raising the dead is claimed. Surely God is at work and in a big way. Where, then, are the 'few'?

The Few

Why then did Jesus say: *"Go in through the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and many are the ones entering in through it. For narrow is the gate, and constricted is the way that leads away into life, and few are the ones finding it."* (Matthew 7:13-14). Are all these good folk - two billion, remember, a third of mankind - on that 'narrow way'? Is it possible that what Jesus then adds has gone unheeded? *"But beware of the false prophets who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inside they are plundering wolves"* (v.15)?

Clearly, Jesus expected trouble ahead. 'Narrow...constricted', he warns, will be the path to life. Yet - are all two billion on that path? A billion? Even half that? When in the flesh he saw his following as a 'little flock'. In the first outpouring of Spirit power following the first Christian Pentecost Christians remained a minority

sect. There was indeed widespread knowledge of Jesus' work, for even kings knew of him: *"For the king [Agrippa] knows of these things, unto whom also I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things is hidden from him; for this hath not been done in a corner"* (Acts 26:26). News of his miracles, teaching, suffering, death and resurrection permeated the Roman world.

The faint response to the Gospel message isn't surprising. After all, Jesus said: *"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever would save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake and the gospel's shall save it"* (Mark 8:34-35). To embrace Christianity could be a death sentence! Indeed it has over the centuries meant martyrdom for countless men and women. So why such enthusiasm - at least in our peaceful West?

Empty Worship?

In the days of Jeremiah the prophet, crowds worshiped in the Temple. But it was empty worship, despite their enthusiasm. They lacked the substance of true worship: *"Behold, you trust in lying words, that cannot profit. Will you steal, murder, and commit adultery, and swear falsely, and burn incense to Baal, and walk after other gods that you have not known"* (Jeremiah 7: 8-9). Their behaviour failed to match their religious enthusiasm. Personal lives lacked holiness, and their public worship - though carried out in God's Temple - owed more to the surrounding pagan cult than to God's revealed worship pattern.

Israel failed to heed the warning given through Moses just before they entered the 'land of promise':

"When Jehovah thy God shall cut off the nations from before you, whither you go to dispossess them, and you dispossess them, and dwell in their land; take heed to yourself that you be not ensnared to follow them, after that they are destroyed from before you; and that thou

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inquire not after their gods, saying, How do these nations serve their gods? even so will I do likewise. Thou shall not do so unto Jehovah your God: for every abomination to Jehovah, which he hates, have they done unto their gods; for even their sons and their daughters do they burn in the fire to their gods. What thing soever I command you, that shall ye observe to do: you shall not add thereto, nor diminish from it"

Deuteronomy 12:29-32

In effect, Israel abandoned the one and only God: *"Has a nation changed its gods, and they were not gods? But My people have changed their Glory without profiting"* (Jeremiah 2:11).

It's a message Jesus himself repeated:

"Not every one that says to me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy by your name, and by your name cast out demons, and by your name do many mighty works? And then will I profess to them, I never knew you: depart from me, you that work iniquity"

Matthew 7:21-23

No - mighty works, religious empires, miracles, martyrdom even (I Corinthians 13:3), are effective only when God is honoured through obedience to His revealed will and Word.

False Faith

The sad fact is that modern Christianity bears little resemblance to the teachings of Jesus. The terminology may coincide but the meaning is at variance with the true Biblical faith. Christianity didn't come on the scene with Jesus! [see our article **6000 Years of Christianity**] What he did was clear away the religious detritus accumulated in Judaism over the centuries. The true faith remained unchanged, solid as a rock.

Yet even before the apostles died the faith they promoted was under fierce attack. Paul, for example, warned the Ephesian elders: *"For I know this, that after my departure grievous wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and out of you yourselves will rise up men speaking perverted things, in order to draw away the disciples after themselves"* (Acts 20:29-30). Indeed the spiritual inheritance left by Jesus was squandered away within a mere half century. Only a remnant remained. The church of the second century would not be recognized by the first Christians.

No Change

Twenty-first century Christianity bears little resemblance to 'the original'. Yet by mid first century the faith was a 'closed book'. Wrote Jude, a brother of Jesus: *"I was*

constrained to write unto you exhorting you to contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered unto the saints" (Jude 3). Peter said the same (II Peter 2:21). Paul, too (II Thessalonians 2:15), adding to Timothy: *"guard that which is committed to you, turning away from the profane babblings and oppositions of the knowledge which is falsely so called; which some professing have erred concerning the faith"* (I Timothy 6:20).

The teachings of Jesus were committed to the apostles who passed on the authentic Gospel to others in an unending chain: *"And the things which thou hast heard from me among many witnesses, the same commit thou to faithful men, who shall be able to teach others also"* (II Timothy 2:2). To meddle with, to change, that deposit of truth endangers salvation. Paul again: *"But even if we, or an angel out of Heaven, should preach a gospel to you beside the gospel we preached to you, let him be accursed"* (Galatians 1:8).

Gospel of Grace

First-century Jews in general were diligent in their outward observance of the divine revelation. But as in the days of Jeremiah (at the time of the exile) religion was superficial and grossly distorted. Many of the Jews - including many priests - embraced Christ's teachings. Some however, failed to grasp the inwardness of his teachings and sought to impose a legal straitjacket on the brethren.

With the coming of the holy Spirit following Jesus' resurrection, the Law became, as prophesied, a matter of the heart: *"After those days, declares Jehovah, I will put My Law in their inward parts, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people"* (Jeremiah 31:33). Its purpose is to define boundaries. The Spirit-led Christian applies it from the heart, from a desire to become Christ-like. *"Follow me"* said Paul. *"as I follow Christ"*.

Note that the Law (the embodiment of the original true faith) remained unchanged - just as Jesus said (Matthew 5:17). But divine power could so change the hearts of men that they would willingly submit to it. In the Christian faith it was not imposed by an external legal system but by grace - the open-handed forgiveness of our lawlessness through acceptance of the sacrifice of Jesus: *"...not of works lest any man should boast"* (Ephesians 2:9).

Many of those who today wave the Christian banner are sincere in their worship - but misguided. The Israelites before their apostasy, would - without the indwelling Spirit - joyfully worship JHVH as He prescribed - on the weekly seventh-day Sabbath and on the annual holy convocations. These divinely appointed days were - and remain - the framework of true worship. Wrote the Psalmist: *"Worship Jehovah with gladness; come before His face with joyful*

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singing. Know that Jehovah, He is God; He has made us, and not we ourselves, His people and the sheep of His pasture. Enter into His gates with thanksgiving, into His courts with praise; be thankful to Him; bless His name" (Psalm 100).

The early church followed suit, worshiping on the days the LORD had prescribed - from the heart *'in spirit and in truth'*. But as pagan culture enveloped them those who retained the true worship were under increasing pressure to conform. Few were willing to make the necessary sacrifices demanded by Jesus.

Jesus affirmed that his church would never die (Matthew 16:18). At his promised return it will still be here. Small, perhaps - but still maintaining *'the faith once for all delivered to the saints'*.

Open Invitation

If I advertise nationally an employment opportunity I'm initially inviting all and sundry. Those who apply *'self-select'*. It is then my responsibility to choose the most suitable candidate.

The Father has an open invitation for anyone to come to Him by way of His Son. Wherever the Gospel is proclaimed there is His calling card.

However, in some manner the Father chooses from among mankind those whom He will *'draw'* to Jesus, those who apply to His invitation, whom He will prepare to serve in His Kingdom.

Said Jesus: *"All that the Father gives to Me shall come to Me, and the one coming to Me I will in no way cast out"* (John 6:37). And: *"No one is able to come to Me unless the Father who sent Me draws him"* (v.44).

That, of course, doesn't exclude human choice. We are free to accept, ignore or reject the invitation: *"...the ones with Him are the called and chosen and faithful ones"* (Revelation 17:14). It's commitment for life.

Sadly, all shades of culture, religious diversity, personal circumstances, education *etc* - aided and abetted by *'the god of this world'*, Satan - have cast a veil over the eyes of mankind, blinding us to the divine plan, the Gospel. But, wrote the apostle Peter (II Peter 3:9): *"God is not willing*

that any of us should be destroyed [in Ge-Henna, 'hell'] but that all should come to repentance".

In God's time that veil will be lifted; *"And He will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering which covers all people, and the veil that is woven over all nations"* (Isaiah 25:7). That time is when Jesus the Messiah returns to reign as supreme ruler of the planet, the *'King of kings'*.

But not just those who are alive at His coming. *All* who have breathed will, in God's time, be raised from their graves and they, too, will be free to accept the invitation. *"Do not marvel at this, for an hour is coming in which all those in the tombs will hear His voice. And they will come out, the ones having done good into a resurrection of life; and the ones having practiced evil into a resurrection of judgment"*.

Few Called

Unless an outside power works on the human mind, the beliefs we are born into and grow into are like chains. They mentally bind us, and we make fundamental change only rarely by human will. Witness the power of religious belief which - as we see in contemporary Islam or with the *'Christian'* paramilitaries - drives men and women to murder for their faith.

Given such powerful mindsets and given the all-invasive Western secular culture it is no surprise that when we meet the challenge of Jesus Christ so few take up the challenge.

The good news is that the spiritual blindness will be removed. Man will be freed from the shackles that bind us in darkness: *"And He will destroy in this mountain the face of the covering that is cast over all peoples, and the veil that is spread over all nations"* (Isaiah 25:7)

If *you* are experiencing that divine *'draw'* - don't ignore it! Whatever the challenges you may face as a true disciple of the Saviour of the world the reward - serving Him for eternity in a perfect spirit body - is way beyond human imagination.

Should you wish to discuss this in more detail, we will be available to answer any questions you may have. Write to us at any of our addresses (inside front page). We may be able, if desired, to arrange to answer your questions face-to-face.

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