

HOW CHRIST SEALS HIS BRIDE

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So what could she possibly have been thinking? Bride-to-be Jennifer Wilbanks hopped on a Greyhound bus. She certainly would not have been the first young woman to get cold feet on her way to the altar. But she disappeared without a trace. And the search that followed gripped the nation.

Undergoing psychiatric treatment Jennifer Wilbanks is confronting the issues she says turned her into the “Runaway Bride”. An avid marathon runner, she now admits she’s been running from her problems most of her life.

Historians tell us that romantic love is a fairly late discovery of Western civilization. In the European family of the 18th and 19 centuries, lovelessness was the general rule. “Marriage was regarded as an economic contract, thus romance was considered a dangerous foundation to build a marriage upon. Whether a husband and wife were happy with one another and were well matched emotionally, spiritually and intellectually was an irrelevant issue.”¹ In *Fiddler on the Roof*, Tevye’s wife cannot answer the question, “Do you love me?” It hadn’t crossed her mind whether she loved her husband! She merely had duties to perform.

In refreshing contrast to this loveless concept is the Bible idea of romantic love. Isaac and Rebecca experienced a genuine love affair in their marriage. Gen. 24:67; 26:8. Jacob doted on Rachel so much

that seven years of servitude for her hand “seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her.” Gen. 29:20. The Song of Songs sets the stage for an ideal marriage as an impassioned love duet. In fact, when the entire Bible is rightly understood, it turns out to be one grand love epic, with the thrilling climax coming near the end of Revelation.

It’s as if God anticipated our last-day heightened interest in love and marriage, and left the Bible’s best-kept secret for us until the end. All the tangled skein of millennia of theological perplexity suddenly finds resolution in a divine-human love story: Christ is a Bridegroom, and His church becomes His bride. Salvation history resolves itself into a thrilling drama and His wooing, infidelity on the part of the bride-to-be, her alienation and infatuation with a false love, her repentance, her reconciliation with the One whose love is true, the tryst, the growing love and appreciation on her part, the marriage, and finally the “honeymoon,” which I have dared to suggest is the time of trouble, of which we have been so afraid.

If the researchers are correct when they say that romantic love is fairly recent in our civilization, we can look with pity on those hundreds of years of unlighted loveless duty that husbands and wives endured, until death mercifully released them. Those were dark ages. But the church has also suffered her darkness and immaturity. All too often, being a Christian has meant dry duty to perform. There was a heaven to win and a hell to shun, and much hard work to merit the one and escape the other. The fundamental motivation through these

¹ *BYU Today*, Oct. 1985, p. 45.

long centuries has been egocentric—a concern for personal security. Will I be saved? Will I get to heaven? How can I avoid being lost? How can I gain assurance of *my* salvation?

Why Christianity Has Often Been an Embarrassment to God

This preoccupation with egocentric concern has produced many less than lovely images of devotion. The horrors of the cruel religious persecutions of the Dark Ages grew out of it. Islam arose as a protest against it. Atheism and communism would never be what they are without it. Even in modern times, the same self-centered obsession has produced dour, stern, severe caricatures of Christianity.

But now the sunny original Bible picture comes into focus. A new motivation can grip human hearts, one that transcends selfish concern and in the process overcomes our ancient enemy—fear. The gospel is seen as the Bridegroom wooing the bride, a demonstration of His true love. A new and different response is kindled in the human heart. There is an appreciation of His love that eclipses the old self-concerned questions, How-can-I-escape-hell, and how-can-I-get-a-reward-in-heaven. Now an explosive Christ-centered motivation takes over:

“Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have power to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge.” Eph. 3:17-19.

This is the Bridegroom-bride kind of love. It is, of course, purer and deeper than any that a human marriage could ever know; but it is illustrated by the realities of romantic love. The early apostles' devotion was a pure flame free of this self-centered smoke. But then there came the “falling away,” the apostasy that produced the darkness of medieval times. The confusion brought by the apostate Christianity known as the “little horn” or the “beast of Daniel and Revelation obscures the Bridegroom's love and distorts His character.

Luther's pre-conversion fear of Christ illustrates the tragic effects of this darkness. Christ was looked upon as a stern taskmaster, cruel and vengeful. Even His second coming has often been distorted in modern times to be a cosmic revenge inflicted on His hapless enemies. He comes to reward His partisan devotees and to mow down with a heavenly machine gun all on the other side, to the cheers of His followers. But I don't believe we can herald to the world a message of “good news” that will say, “be ye reconciled to God” while we represent Christ at His second coming as mowing down His helpless enemies with a heavenly machine gun. This is what the picture of Him as emitting a “lethal radiation” implies. Will God *personally* “devour the wicked?” Let us convey to the world a true revelation of God's character. “The last rays of merciful light, the last message of mercy to be given to the world, is a revelation of His character of love.” COL 4:15. To present Christ in His second coming as having lost His mercy and

His love is misrepresentation due to sad misunderstanding.

To preach the love of God truly is not namby-pamby sentimentalism. It is hard reality. And it motivates truly all who choose to “believe.” And terribly hardens all who disbelieve.

Who slams the door in the face of the wicked when probation closes? Does God do it of His own initiative? I don’t see God pushing the door shut at all; it looks to me like He has been propping it open for many decades. I see the wicked closing that door themselves. “If a man withdraws himself from light and evidence, and yields to Satan’s seducing arts, he himself draws the curtains of unbelief about him, so that light cannot be distinguished from darkness.” Here is a clear statement: “God destroys no man. Every man who is destroyed will destroy himself.” OHC 26. How desperately our youth need to get a clear picture of the character of God.

Preoccupation with a self-centered concern for eternal security is only natural under such a system of confused thought.

Fear takes over as the pervading emotion in this concern for eternal security. Some people have discovered that there is good money to be had in preying on this anxiety. Fear of purgatory and eternal damnation has enriched the coffers of many medieval and modern churches. Fear of not passing the investigative judgment has also plagued the hearts of many who boast that they would welcome Christ’s coming, but secretly dread that it might be in their lifetime. Earnest efforts to obey God’s commandments, if motivated by fear or

hope of reward, are said by Paul to be an “under the law” experience. On the other hand, the joyous obedience that springs from an appreciation of Christ’s sacrifice, this the apostle describes as being “under grace.” Rom. 6:14.

Greater Than a Cure for Cancer: A Cure for Fear

Fear overshadows our human experience almost continually from the womb to the tomb. On a moment’s notice, terror suddenly confronting us can plunge us into blood-curdling horror. This natural-born fear lies just beneath the placid surface of our normal composure.

It was to solve this problem that Christ came: “Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death he might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage. . . . Therefore he had to be made like his brethren in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God. . . . Because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted. Hebrews 2:14-18.

Three appealing truths emerge from this:

(1) Christ’s identification with us in our fallen state has to be complete if He is to solve our fear problem. He must take upon Himself the full burden of our condition of sin, yet without sinning. He must know how we fell, even to the point of bearing our guilt. He must feel the soul-wrenching burden of our anxiety, and conquer it. He was “made to be sin

who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” 2 Cor. 5:21, RSV.

(2) Jesus must suffer death as the real thing, not the mere restful sleep of unconsciousness that we call death, but the awful reality of the experience of the second death. Rev. 2:11; 20:14. Crucifixion involved for the ancients far more than physical shame and torture. It was the idea of enduring the final, hopeless curse of God. Gal. 3:10; Dt. 21:22, 23. It was this feeling of being forsaken by His Father that wrung from Christ’s soul that bitter cry, “Why has thou forsaken me?” There is absolutely no human sorrow like unto that sorrow. He drank a cup of distilled anguish, the essence of all the agony of an entire world in all time. Never has a cry of pain arisen to heaven that was not multiplied to infinitude in Christ’s sufferings on the cross. It was given to Him to “taste death for every one.” Hebrews 2:9. Those were deep waters that He went through for us, and that was a dark night of anguish for Him!

Children playing in the sunlight can have no adequate appreciation of such a sacrifice. And little children is what the bulk of God’s professed people have been for many generations, absorbed in their concern about what will happen to *them* in the judgment. Even when their self-centered concern branches out to a concern for the salvation of other people, it is still tied to that same focus of self-centered insecurity. If *I* am not the center of concern, at least *we* are. The root of this concern is that same “fear of death” which makes us all “subject to lifelong bondage.” Christians through the

ages have been like a little flower girl at a wedding. She is ever so pure and sweet; no one can criticize her, but her greatest concern is to get some of the cake and ice cream. In contrast is the grown-up woman who is the bride. This female couldn’t care less about the cake and ice cream: she is concerned to be with the bridegroom. She has become mature, she appreciates his character, she loves and reveres him. She is Delia Owens, ready to go with him even to the wild Kalahari. Why can’t Christ have such a bride?

(3) There is something in the mission of Christ that forever annihilates this taproot of human fear and obsession with reward. Both are wholly expelled from the heart by a mature appreciation of the heavenly Bridegroom’s love. Says John: “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent His only Son into the world, so that we might live through Him. . . . In this is love perfected with us, that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love.” 1 John 4:9-18.

We Can Begin to Understand the Process

How is the fear cast out? God’s people do not reenact the sacrifice of Calvary—that would be impossible. They cannot “taste death for every one,” not even for themselves. If we should taste even with the tip of our tongue that bitter cup He drank to the dregs, we would perish. We cannot duplicate His sacrifice, but we can learn to *appreciate* what *He* went through. When the reality

of His devotion for us beings to unfold, we begin to comprehend the “breadth, and length, and depth, and height” of the love of Christ “which passeth knowledge.” Eph. 3:18, 19. The result? Something happens that all the psychiatry in the world cannot accomplish. Fear vanishes, and a new motivation becomes possible.

No true bride marries a man for a meal-ticket. Marrying for money can become a form of prostitution. In the Bible, Babylon is termed a harlot because her so-called devotion to Christ is motivated by self-centered concern. This counterfeit develops into a new height of sophistication. The final time of trouble will be ushered in by an ultimate display of selfish concern known as “the mark of the beast.” Rev. 13:16, 17. As terrorism preys on human fear, so this final religious persecution will prey on any residual element of fear left in human hearts. Those who have not seen and appreciated that true heavenly love revealed at the cross where fear is cast out, will succumb to this final test. The most highly refined terrorism of all ages will zero in on this anxiety plexus.

In contrast, the seal of God will be God’s acknowledgement that at last He has a people in whose hearts that naked fear has been cast out by an appreciation of His true love. Rev. 7:1-4; 14:15. The concept is unique and peculiar to Seventh-day Adventism. It is not widely understood in other churches. It is the basic idea foundational to each of the three main “pillars” of Seventh-day Adventism

(1) The idea of *agape* especially is essential to the Adventist concept of the nature of man. Wherever

there is a belief in the natural immortality of the soul, agape has to be absent. This means that the vast majority of professing Christians who embrace the doctrine of natural immortality, are blinded to its implications. Anders Nygren, Lutheran Bishop of Lund, one of the few non-Adventist theologians who believed as we do about the nature of man, says: “This idea of the natural immortality of the soul is completely foreign to the fundamental religious dogma, we can be fairly certain that we are within the sphere of Eros [egocentric, Hellenistic love].”

This means that these good people are unable to appreciate “the breadth, and length, and depth, and height” of “the agape of Christ, which passeth knowledge.” They cannot truly appreciate the cross, and therefore cannot proclaim it effectively, despite their sincerity. What a challenge to us!

(2) The idea of agape is unique to the ministry of Christ in the second apartment of the heavenly sanctuary. This may seem a bold statement to make, but it follows logically from (1). We are told in Early Writings pp. 55, 56 that agape is ministered only from the Most Holy Apartment and can be received or appreciated only by those whose faith follows the High Priest in that ministry. Thus agape is uniquely inherent in the Adventist doctrine of the sanctuary. Further, we are told that the last rays of light to shine on this dark world will be a revelation of that agape (COL 415). (Incidentally, nothing less will ever penetrate honest hearts in Islam or Hinduism).

(3) The idea of agape is unique to the Adventist concept of the perpetuity of the law of God. The

remnant church is distinguished by its obedience to “the commandments of God.” But true obedience to the law is agape, for “agape is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom 13:10). This is because the cross alone can provide a true motivation for obedience (DA 480). The absence of agape, like the absence of necessary elements of physical nutrition, causes all kinds of spiritual illnesses to proliferate.

Revelation 19 is the marriage-climax chapter of the Bible:

“Let us be glad and rejoice, and give honor to Him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and His wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints.” Rev. 19:6, 7.

Can you imagine the thrill of the “bride” as she sees her loved One go forth in the grandest procession of eternity?

“And I saw heaven opened, and behold a white horse; and he that sat upon him was called Faithful and True, and in righteousness He doth judge and make war. His eyes were as a flame of fire, and on His head were many crowns; and He had a name written, that no man knew, but He Himself. And He was clothed with a vesture dipped in blood: and His name is called The Word of God.” Rev. 19:11-13.

An appreciation of how that Rider’s vesture has been “dipped in blood” is what will thrill the heart of God’s people. They will sense as never before what it cost Him to redeem them, how dark was His night of anguish, how deep were the waters He went through. This alone enables the bride to grow up

from her flower-girl status to that “measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” Eph. 4:13. See Zech. 12:10-13:1. At last she can stand by His side as a bride! Only then is she prepared to share His heart in ultimate intimacy.

The Soul-thrilling Climax of the Ages

Another name for this last-day development is the cleansing of the sanctuary. While it is true that the issues involved in this cosmic Day of Atonement are far greater than that of the spiritual state of God’s people, there is no way that the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary can be completed unless first of all the hearts of God’s people are cleansed. This is in preparation for the close of probation and the unfolding of the final time of trouble. Again, the cleansing refers primarily to the purification of the springs of motivation in the hearts of God’s people.

Is such a work possible? Can such a glorious denouement of the plan of salvation actually take place within human history?

The enemy says No. He would love to confuse the picture with cynicism and unbelief. But God’s word says, “Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed.” Not, maybe, perhaps, possibly, we-hope-so, it-would-be-nice-if, etc. No—the sanctuary *will* be cleansed, or God’s word must fail. The marriage of the Lamb *will* come, and His wife *will* make herself “ready.”

Blessed is the one who believes the good news! Can you think of a greater joy to lift the hearts of God’s people during the time of trouble than their realization that these prophecies are actually being fulfilled?

As we seek to understand whether the church can hasten or delay the promised second coming of Jesus, we need to ponder who is “the Lamb’s wife” who must first “make herself ready” (Rev. 19:7, 8). Those who say the church can do nothing to hasten the return of “the Lamb” tend to be perplexed on this issue.

They see Revelation 21:6-27 as defining “the bride, the Lamb’s wife” as the literal “city” of the New Jerusalem. This raises a question: if “God is [its] builder and Maker” (Heb. 11:10), how can the “city which hath foundations” be said to “make [itself] ready”? And further, wouldn’t Jesus be guilty of idolatry if He loves a material city of golden streets, walls of jewels, and literal gates? When He cried out to the old city, “O Jerusalem, . . . thou that killest the prophets” (Matt. 23:37), was He addressing its literal gates and stones, or the people who inhabited it? When you were married, did you love the bride or your house?

When John in vision saw “the Lamb stand on mount Zion,” was it the literal city or the “144,000 who had His Father’s name written in their foreheads”? As John saw them, as a group they apparently had by that time “made [themselves] ready,” for “they sung as it were a new song before the throne [and] . . . [followed] the Lamb whithersoever He goeth. . . . Without fault before the throne of God” (Rev. 14:1-5).

No woman in the world is worthy to be the Bride of the Son of God! But all through the Bible His church in a corporate sense is said to be the object of His conjugal love. Neither Luther nor C. S. Lewis had

much use for the Book of Revelation. But those whose hearts yearn for Christ’s soon return are thrilled with its message; they don’t help to save themselves by a legalistic do-it-yourself method, but they stop resisting “the Lamb” and they let Him “wash” them “in His blood.” And they let Him give them the gift of special repentance (3:19). Is it not in that sense that the Bride, “the Lamb’s wife,” can “make herself ready”?

Albert L. Peace was a man in love. His fiancée was all he had ever wanted in a woman and they planned to soon be married. Then he encountered a problem that would crush all his plans. He was going blind. The woman he had loved and hoped to share his life with walked out of his life forever. She could not stand the possibility of living her life with a man whom she unquestionably would need to care for the rest of her life.

Albert was shattered. But in the midst of his tragedy he sought and found the love of the One that he knew would not reject him.

Taking pen in hand he composed the words of a long favored Christian hymn: “O Love That Will Not Let Me Go”

The culmination of all history will take place at this marriage supper of the lamb: all of history from the fall of Adam through the cross of Christ, and every instance of sin and redemption in between is building towards this great event.

And in this paradigm, which we might call the “Bridal Paradigm”, we can begin to draw a picture of a God who enjoys us, who is filled with affection for

us, and who desires to embrace us. Even in our weaknesses and stumbling.

The “Bridal Paradigm” gives us a picture of a bridegroom, Christ, who is longing for His bride, you, me, us. And when it is all said and done, the marriage supper of the lamb will fulfill and consummate this paradigm, this frame of reference of who we are in Christ.