

THE GOSPEL FEAST¹

By Paul Penno Jr.

March 22, 2014

The word “gospel” means “good news,” and good news is always interesting. When Jesus proclaimed it, “the common people heard Him gladly.”² The apostles’ preaching was also so powerful and attractive that their enemies confessed that they had “turned the world upside down.”³

In every age, God’s Good News has compelled the attention of mankind. Never does the Holy Spirit indite a tame, lifeless message. The last proclamation of the gospel is communicated by “angels . . . unto them that dwell on the earth, to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people, . . . with a loud voice.” Then the message swells “mightily” as it lightens the earth with glory.⁴ The “angels” symbolize the ministry of God’s servants.

This scenario calls for the most powerful and interesting communication that the world has ever heard. Neutrality is an impossible reaction to it. As in the days of the apostles, people will get off the fence and either accept it wholeheartedly or reject it just as decidedly.

Any presentation of the “gospel” that is dull and boring is suspect. The youth who complain that Christianity is not exciting, not positive, not

attractive, most likely have never heard that pure gospel message which catalyzes humanity.

The 1888 message lifted Adventist preaching and teaching out of the doldrums. Ellen White describes its impact on youth:

“Meetings were held in the College which were intensely interesting. . . . The Christian life, which had before seemed to them [the students] undesirable and full of inconsistencies, now appeared in its true light, in remarkable symmetry and beauty. He who had been to them as a root out of dry ground, without form or comeliness, became “the chiefest among ten thousand,” and the one “altogether lovely.” . . . One after another of these students of Battle Creek College, hitherto ignorant of the truth and of the saving grace of God, espoused the cause of Christ. . . .

“[Listeners] expressed . . . gladness and gratitude of heart for the sermons that had been preached by Bro. A. T. Jones; they saw the truth, goodness, mercy, and love of God as they never before had seen it.”⁵

Two of Ellen White’s favorite words to describe the 1888 message were “precious” and “most precious.”⁶ Her vocabulary of enthusiastic endorsement of the message and ministry of Jones and Waggoner nearly exhausts the English language treasury of enthusiasm. The following is

¹ Matthew 5:6. 12, 370.

² Mark 12:32.

³ Acts 13:32.

⁴ Revelation 14:6; 18:1-4.

⁵ *Review and Herald*, February 12, 1889.

⁶ See *Testimonies to Ministers*, p. 91; Ms. 8a, 1888; Ms. 15, 1888; Ms. 24, 1888; Ms. 13, 1889; *Review and Herald*, March 5, July 23, September 3, 1889; March 11, 1890; August 8, 1893; Letter 51a, 1895.

an assortment of these phrases culled verbatim from her writings between 1888 and 1896:

“God has given them His message;” “presented with freshness and power;” “Christ’s delegated messengers;” “men whom God has commissioned;” “the demonstration of the Holy Spirit;” “men divinely appointed;” [there is] “beauty in the precious things presented at this [1888] Conference . . . convincing evidence;” “most precious light;” “precious truths;” “the waves of truth;” “harmonizes perfectly with the light which God has been pleased to give me during all the years of my experience;” “this message . . . will lighten the earth with its glory;” “it was the first clear [public] teaching about this subject from any human lips I have heard;” “in Minneapolis God gave precious gems of truth to His people in new settings;” “this light . . . [is] the matchless charms of Christ;” “God sent these young men [Jones and Waggoner] to bear a special message;” “God has committed to His servants a message for this time;” “His chosen servants;” “the true religion, the only religion of the Bible . . . that advocates righteousness by the faith of the Son of God;” “showers of the latter rain from heaven . . . in Minneapolis;” “men upon whom God has laid the burden of a solemn work;” “God is working through these instrumentalities;” “through brethren Jones and Waggoner; . . . these men had a message from God;” “God has upheld them; . . . He has given them precious light, and their message has fed the people of God;” “in rejecting the message given at Minneapolis, men committed sin;” “light from the throne of God;” “the message of His healing grace;”

“if you accept the message, you accept Jesus;” “every fiber of my heart said Amen;” “the manifest movement of the Spirit of God;” “Brother Jones has borne the message . . . and light and freedom and the outpouring of the Spirit of God has attended the work. . . . ‘Messengers I [the Lord] sent to My people with light, with grace and power;” “great and glorious truths;” “a Christ-like spirit manifested, such as Elder E. J. Waggoner had shown . . . like a Christian gentleman . . . in a kind and courteous manner;” “the voice of the true Shepherd;” “wherever this message comes, its fruits are good . . . great treasures of truth. . . . A life-giving message . . . to give life to the dry bones,” “the deep movings of the Spirit of God have been felt upon almost every heart. . . . We seemed to breathe in the very atmosphere of Heaven;” “the present message . . . bears the divine credentials;” “the Lord is giving fresh evidence of His truth, placing it in a new setting, that the way of the Lord may be prepared;” “we have been hearing [Christ’s] voice in the message that has been going for the last two years [1890];” “the message He has sent us during these last two years is from Heaven;” “the heavenly credentials;” “it is the third angel’s message in verity;” “messages bearing the divine credentials . . . set forth among us with beauty and loveliness, to charm all whose hearts are not closed with prejudice;” “new wine . . . additional light;” “Brother Jones speaks . . . [the people] fed with large morsels from the Lord’s table;” “heaven-sent refreshing of the shower of grace;” “the voice of the heavenly Merchantman.”

This is only a brief sampling of some 375 such expressions. An eyewitness, J. S. Washburn, told us how he remembered seeing Ellen White sit on the front seat at Minneapolis while Waggoner was speaking, her face beaming as she kept saying “Amen! Brethren, there is great light here.”⁷ She herself confirms this when she says of Waggoner’s message, “When [he] presented it, every fiber of my heart said Amen.”⁸

Yet most of our people have acquired the idea that there is something dangerous about that message, that in many areas Ellen White disagreed with it. She couldn’t have said all those things if she had disagreed with it. In fact, *there is not one area* of the message that she disagreed with when she came to understand it.

Six years later she was still enthusiastically describing the ongoing message as “the sweetest melodies that come from human lips,—justification by faith, and the righteousness of Christ.”⁹ Imagine a message presented to Seventh-day Adventists so joyous and hope inspiring that the listeners were tempted to think it was too good to be true.¹⁰ That is what people thought when they heard the Apostle Paul proclaim “glad tidings.”¹¹

The message is not so much the miracle of feeding hungry people as the greater miracle of

⁷ Signed report of interview with J. S. Washburn, Hagerstown, Maryland, June 4, 1950.

⁸ Ms. 5, 1889.

⁹ *Review and Herald*, April 4, 1895.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, July 23, 1889.

¹¹ Acts 13:32.

developing a spiritual appetite in people who are so undernourished that they do not even feel hungry for the truth of God’s word. The Lord wants us to learn to appreciate what a blessing a healthy appetite is. Without it, life is hardly worth living, and death by starvation may be the result.

Not only is the Lord our Shepherd, He is also our Host who seats us at His table loaded with nutritious spiritual food. But most of us are not spiritually hungry and thirsty, and many are literally starving for food for their souls. Day after day, week after week passes by without their personally eating the Bread of life. A millionaire starving for want of an appetite may be worse off than a famine refugee who feels his hunger.

If the Lord’s messenger were among us today, she would have to say again, “This I do know, that our churches are dying for the want of teaching on the subject of righteousness by faith in Christ, and on kindred truths.”¹²

Humanity is dying for the want of teaching on the subject of righteousness by faith in Christ, and on kindred truths.

The Inestimable Blessing of Feeling Hungry and Thirsty

There is a special happiness that comes to those who feel this spiritual appetite. Jesus says, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.”¹³ What kind of happiness will we know when we learn to feel that hunger?

¹² *Gospel Workers*, p. 301.

¹³ Matthew 5:6.

Familiar truths of the Bible will present themselves to our mind in a new way; texts of Scripture that we may have learned in childhood will burst upon us with a new meaning. We will know that Christ Himself is leading us by His Spirit; a divine Teacher will be at our side.

Furthermore, we will no longer need to force ourselves to speak to someone else about our faith. We will sense a motivation to speak to others of the comforting things that have been revealed to us. We will want to communicate home fresh thought in regard to the character or the work of Christ. We will have some insight of His love to communicate to those who love Him and to those who do not love Him. The wisdom that enabled Jesus to reach all kinds of people can be communicated to the one who believes in Him, for He says that “greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father.”¹⁴

When the Lord says that we are “blessed” when we hunger after righteousness, what kind must He be speaking of? There is only one kind—that which is by faith. Not one human soul possesses even a tiny amount of innate, natural righteousness. The Bible says that “all alike have sinned,” and “all the world [has] become guilty before God.”¹⁵

The first step in receiving the gift of real salvation is to realize and confess that we need it—totally. Christ is not a Repairman who patches us up a bit.

¹⁴ John 14:12.

¹⁵ Romans 3:23, NEB, 19.

Those who are converted are created anew, given a new heart.¹⁶

In other words, those who feel that they already understand righteousness by faith lose the blessing, while those who feel empty are the only ones who can “be filled.” This is a tragic reality, for there are even some ministers and church leaders who do not sense their need and have no appetite. They already feel “full,” when they are starved.

According to the Lord Jesus, we, both leaders and people, have a basic general problem. Speaking especially to the leaders of His people in the last days, He says: “You say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing.’”¹⁷ This is another way of saying, “You say, ‘I don’t feel hungry or thirsty.’” The Lord is describing how His people generally feel wealthy in their understanding of the gospel, when in reality they are desperately “poor.” “We have the truth; we understand the doctrine of righteousness by faith,” is their boast. This feeling of satisfaction dooms us to world embarrassment, for He says that we are “wretched, and miserable, and poor.” There is little in such Christianity to make the world take notice.

And, says the Lord Himself, the ones who *primarily* exhibit this lack of healthy appetite are the leadership of His people in the last days.¹⁸ The

¹⁶ John 3:3-8; Psalm 51:10; Ezekiel 36:26.

¹⁷ Revelation 3:16, 17.

¹⁸ Verse 14; Revelation 1:20. “The church of the Laodiceans” is the seventh, the last of the long series extending from the time of the apostles down to the end of world history. Thus Laodicea in Revelation is obviously the

“angel of the church” is not the same as the church itself. The churches are “the seven golden candlesticks,” but “the angel of the church of the Laodiceans” is its leadership, including administrators, educators, pastors, elders, deacons, teachers, youth leaders, etc. As a group, the Lord says we share that common illness of feeling full when in fact we are malnourished.

He is not criticizing or finding fault with us; He is a Physician who tells the patient the truth that he has cancer and only immediate surgery will save his life. This is a message of love, for only those whom He loves with intimate family love (*phileo*) does He “rebuke and chasten.”¹⁹

A Message of Healing for the Church

In former times, faithful ministers pleaded with God that the haughty hearts of church members might realize and feel deeply the meaning of redemption, and seek to learn the meekness and lowliness of Jesus. In all churches there are serious-minded people who sense that something is wrong. They feel deeply that a revival of true godliness is the greatest and most urgent of all our needs. They see, pride in the church, hypocrisy, deception, vanity of dress, frivolity, and amusement. They see a desire for supremacy. All these sins can cloud the mind so that eternal realities cannot be discerned.

church of our present day. “The angel of the church” is the leadership of the church. According to Christ in Revelation 3:14-21, that is where the basic problem of the church has its source.

¹⁹ Revelation 3:19.

Even though we now sense a lack of revival and reformation, there are beautiful pictures of success that describe the future of God’s work. “This gospel . . . will be preached in all the world,” says Jesus confidently. “The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.” “I will pour out My Spirit on all flesh . . . It shall come to pass that whoever calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved. For in Mount Zion and in Jerusalem there shall be deliverance.”²⁰

Jesus likened His people to “wineskins” that cannot hold “new wine” unless they are also made new.²¹ If through faith in Christ we will become new “wineskins,” He will fill us with the “new wine” of precious New Testament truth. God will give additional light, and old truths that have long been lost will be recovered and replaced. “One interest will prevail, one subject will swallow up every other”—the pure, unadulterated gospel of “CHRIST OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.”²²

This last message is to be simple, beautiful, and always interesting. The future in God’s plan has to be good news. As we discover what that most precious message is, we shall find that it differs from what is commonly assumed to be “the doctrine of righteousness by faith.” We shall find that popular ideas outside of the Bible have infiltrated our thinking so that Christ seems far away and distantly unconcerned about us. The truth about Him is Good

²⁰ Matthew 24:14; Revelation 18:1-4; Habakkuk 2:14; Joel 2:28-32.

²¹ Matthew 9:17.

²² See Jeremiah 23:6; 33:16; Isaiah 32:17.

News far better than most people imagine is possible. The revelation of “Christ our righteousness” discloses Him as a Saviour nigh at hand and not afar off.

How Can We Learn to Feel Hungry and Thirsty?

Seldom can a sick person be healed by forced feeding, although in emergencies it may be necessary. To grit your teeth and clench your fists and force yourself to read the Bible and pray may possibly be helpful, but it is doubtful. A healthy person does not eat two or three meals a day because the Bible tells him to or because the doctor orders him to. He eats because he is hungry; his appetite drives him to it.

That hunger is what the true gospel activates in a believing person’s heart. If the hunger is not there, the reason has to be one or the other of two problems: (a) he or she has not understood how good the Good News is; or, Heaven forbid! (b) he or she has rejected it.

For example, the Lord says: “To you who fear My name the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings; and you shall go out and grow fat like stall-fed calves.”²³

Note that the “healing” activates the growth! To “fear” His name does not mean to be afraid that He will zap you if you don’t shape up. It means to reverence His character; and that becomes possible only when you see and appreciate His goodness; and again, that in turn depends on comprehending what happened at His cross. All this is the “healing” process.

²³ Malachi 4:2.

This is precisely the experience that true faith in Christ accomplishes. Our natural, unconverted heart is “enmity against God,” or alienated from Him.²⁴ But the love revealed at the cross heals that alienation:

“All things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Therefore we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.”²⁵

Elsewhere Paul calls this experience “receiving the reconciliation.”²⁶ To return to Malachi’s illustration of the calves in the stall, a process of growth begins immediately, and growth is always characterized by a healthy appetite. Calves that are growing up can’t get enough food! You don’t have to force them to eat.

Something is wrong if we have to force ourselves to read the Bible and pray. A buried root of alienation from God is still there in the heart. Something is wrong if husband or wife has to force himself or herself to spend time with each other. “Husband, wife, I’ve made a New Year’s resolution: I’m going to try to force myself to spend ten or

²⁴ Romans 8:7.

²⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:18-21.

²⁶ Romans 5:11.

fifteen minutes with you each day, and I hope I can remember, because if I don't I am afraid I'll suffer some disaster." How does the Lord feel when we have to set our alarm clocks and discipline ourselves in order to remember to spend some time with Him and His word? What has happened to the appetite, to the natural hunger that love inspires?

As "the power of God to salvation," the pure gospel reconciles the alienated heart to God through the blood of the cross, implanting a hunger for the word of God and a yearning to talk with the Lord that can never be fully satisfied until we meet Him face to face. As physical hunger drives one to eat, so reconciliation with God, or receiving the atonement, motivates us to search the Bible hungrily.

Paul says that he finds his greatest delight "in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."²⁷ That means that the attractions that the world once exercised upon him had lost their appeal. Silly TV entertainment and worldly pleasure that once engrossed our attention become nauseating. We have tasted something infinitely better. The heart is captivated by truth!

Eat a delicious peach, or grapefruit, or pear, or some strawberries, and you will find that a candy bar no longer tastes as good as you once thought it did. Jeremiah's experience will become yours: "Your words were found, and I ate them, and Your word was to me the joy and rejoicing of my heart."²⁸

²⁷ Galatians 6:14.

²⁸ Jeremiah 15:16.

Is there never a time for force-feeding? Yes, perhaps, but only as an emergency measure. This new experience of at-one-ment is something which *the Lord* has initiated, for it was He "who has reconciled us to Himself." He also seeks to maintain it. Note the following that speaks of Christ's experience; it will also become yours if you do not resist:

"The Lord God has given Me the tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak a word in season to him who is weary. He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to hear as the learned, The Lord God has opened My ear; and I was not rebellious, nor did I turn away."²⁹

Christ's love is active, not merely passive. He is not aloof, telling us, "Take it or leave it!" He takes us by the hand to lead us: "For I, the Lord your God, will hold your right hand."³⁰ Don't resist His leading or turn away! Jesus promised that He would send the Holy Spirit as His Vicar "that He may abide with you forever."³¹ It is He who awakens us "morning by morning" to listen, to study, to "eat" the word. "Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it.'"³²

Make it your choice to respond to His "awaking," His prompting. Let David's response be yours: "When You said, 'Seek My face,' my heart said to You, 'Your face, Lord, I will seek.'"³³

²⁹ Isaiah 50:4, 5.

³⁰ Isaiah 41:13.

³¹ John 14:16.

³² Isaiah 30:21.

³³ Psalm 27:8.

Peter talks about this keen appetite which is generated within us by the Holy Spirit: “As newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is gracious.”³⁴ This is not only a command; it is a promise of the unending happiness your fellowship with the Lord will bring. It all comes about by tasting that the Lord is gracious. This is an attempt to activate that “taste.” From then on, the appetite will take care of itself!

This is not to suggest that haphazard impulses are the way to study the Bible and to converse with the Lord in prayer. Our meals are not haphazard; we have regular times set aside and we do not resent taking time out from work or play in order to eat. Plan for a time for daily devotional visits with the Lord and His word. The original language of Isaiah 55:6 reads thus:

“*Pay attention to the Lord* while He may be found, call upon Him while He is near. Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; let him return to the Lord, and He will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon.” How can anyone resist that divine initiative?

³⁴ 1 Peter 2:2.