

ENTERTAIN ME!

By Paul Penno, Jr.

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Modern technology is rapidly developing a culture compulsively addicted to unending amusement and entertainment. This is a love affair with death. Only one thing can reverse it, and Jesus has put His finger squarely on it.

George Orwell, Aldous Huxley, and Jesus Christ each predicted a profound change in human character and spiritual values that would characterize our day.

In 1949, George Orwell published his famous book *1984*, in which he anticipated a world as far in the future then as the year 2022 is to us today. His vision of the future was a frightening one. He prophesied that by the time those 35 years had passed we would be trampled down by Big Brother governments—dictators who would manacle human freedom.

Orwell quite accurately foresaw modern life in some repressive lands, but Westerners rejoiced as 1984 finally came and went without a fulfillment of his dire predictions.

Huxley, witty and brilliant, also gave up hope for Western civilization. His book, *Brave New World*, predicted a less frightening future than Orwell had foreseen, but one that beneath the facade was no less lethal. According to Huxley, people would lose their human dignity and freedom—not by new Hitlers and Stalins marching them to reconstructed gas ovens, but by pleasing themselves to death. Modern technology, he predicted, would develop a compulsive addiction to unending amusement and entertainment. And this would degrade serious thought and moral responsibility.

Huxley's prophecy of death by entertainment comes closer to the Western truth. But both Huxley and Orwell failed to penetrate to the inner nature of this moral and spiritual decline of our day. Jesus' view leaped across centuries to perceive its true character.

Nearly 2,000 years ago Christ foresaw something that neither of these modern literary prophets understood. Neither scientific technology nor political totalitarianism is the root of man's cultural deterioration. It stems from the loss of an essential ingredient of human stability: a special kind of love known in the New Testament as *agape*.

Speaking of our time when “the end of the world” would be near, Jesus said: “Nation will rise against nation. . . . There will be famines and earthquakes in various places. . . . many false prophets will appear and deceive many people. Because of the increase of wickedness, the love [*agape*] of most will grow cold.” Matthew 24:7-12.¹

This priceless ingredient of human culture—*agape* love—once rescued ancient civilization from a nose dive into chaotic despair. When Caesar ruled the known world and made the Mediterranean was a “Roman lake,” mankind had sunk into a frightful depravity caused by hopelessness. Never was humanity more inhuman.

For the most part, the masses were slaves. Oppressors and oppressed flocked to the amphitheaters to watch gladiators duel to the death with wild animals or with each other. Staring at people dying in violence was as much fun to Roman crowds as a football game is to us. The sight of naked political outcasts, nailed to crosses and writhing in agony attracted spectators like the World Series does today. Roman restaurants had something unknown in our gourmet dining palaces: a *vomitorium* where sated diners could empty their stomachs in order to eat more.

Little wonder that many Romans, jaded by their pleasures and sadism, coveted suicide as much as we today want to win a lottery jackpot.

Into such a frightful world of cruelty and despair came this new idea of *agape*, a love embodied in the life, death, and resurrection of an obscure Galilean. Jesus brought to view in His life a love that overturned all human values because it revealed dimensions of God’s character of which no one had ever dreamed of. God’s Son actually died as a cosmic outcast nailed on a Roman cross! People couldn’t get over the idea.

Jesus had revealed a love that went as far as hell and out the other side, actually redeeming lost humanity. God Himself was seeking man—not vice versa—and the price He was willing to pay was infinitely individualized. That is, each human being, individually, was the object of that divine love. Slaves, outcasts, and despairing lords and ladies alike discovered a new basis for abounding self-respect.

¹ Bible quotations are from the New International Version.

And with self-respect came a new sense of humanity toward man. Attendance at the gladiatorial combats fell off; crucifixions lost their appeal; *vomitoriums* were forgotten; slavery became passé; the Man of Galilee became widely known as the world's Saviour, and His cross became its most honored symbol.

Thus this new idea of divine love rescued civilization from what would have been global suicide. No other religion or philosophy had ever embodied an idea remotely resembling *agape* love. Although continually opposed in open conflict, it influenced all cultures and religions. The world itself became a safer and more pleasant place in which to live. As the fundamental idea of *agape* penetrated far beyond the confines of the Christian church itself, it became the secret source of stability and hope for the human race although often unrecognized as such.

Yet strangely enough, *agape* met its most determined, yet subtle, opposition within the post-apostolic church itself. Medieval Christianity adulterated and distorted it so badly that it was difficult during the Dark Ages to recognize much in the church that was authentically Christian. Nevertheless, *agape* somehow survived and enjoyed a partial restoration in the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. For all the evil that still remained in the world this special divine love continued to impart moral stability and dignity to human life.

But Christ foresaw our time as a predominantly post-Christian culture when He said that "because of the increase of wickedness, the love [*agape*] of most will grow cold." Matthew 24:12. Christ's word *wickedness* (*anomia* in Greek) literally means lawlessness in the sense of rebellion against the holy law of God. It is a lighthearted irreverence for God's will, an unwillingness to be restrained in any way by His commandments, an arrogant flaunting of ultimate judgment.

This *anomia* shows up today in our insensitive ability to laugh at and make sport of sexual infidelity, materialism, sensuality, and crime with its attendant deceptions and cruelties. Where once such things aroused public outrage and righteous indignation, today we have an open tolerance of what was once abhorred as destructive of human character. Most of the nightly TV shows enjoyed by an estimated audience of 90 million Americans make fun of purity and honesty and revel in *anomia*. What we are viewing is actually a cultural love affair with death.

Christ said that conditions in our day would rival those of Noah's day before the Flood: "People were eating, drinking, marrying and being given in marriage up to the day Noah entered the ark. Then the flood came and destroyed them all." Luke 17:27. Aldous Huxley was not far off the mark. Mankind's obsession with entertainment and pleasure will as surely destroy all that makes human life worth living as did the waters that drowned the ancient world.

Neil Postman; in his book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (Viking: 1985), contends that modern man has all but lost the ability to weigh arguments and form intelligent judgments based on exposition, hypothesis, and logic. The mass media has transformed science, education, journalism, politics and even religion, into bite-sized amusement performances.

Politics, once serious argument (for example, the Lincoln-Douglas debates in the nineteenth century), is now largely a test of who is most witty, telegenic personality. Televised news comes in 45-second doses with the average camera shot lasting three and a half seconds. New York radio station WINS says, "Give us 22 minutes, and we'll give you world." In the same breath a newscaster announces that a not scientist or statesman declares nuclear war inevitable and then quickly adds with a smile, "And now, . . . this word from Burger King." Scenes of earthquakes or mass killings are juxtaposed with frivolous commercials designed to induce laughter. We are only a step away from cracking jokes about a crucifixion or cheering arrogantly as a lion eats an unpopular gladiator.

Humor, which in its healthy form is spontaneous and intelligent, has become calculated silliness. Our mindless laughter is rapidly becoming what Huxley feared; the people in his *Brave New World* were laughing instead of thinking—but worse, they did not know what they were laughing about or why they had stopped thinking!

Dr. George J. Bryjak, professor of sociology at the University of San Diego, says, "For tens of thousands of Americans, sport is the one thing that makes life worth living. As we approach the twenty-first century, this trend will not only continue but accelerate. . . . For tens of thousands of Americans, sport is the only thing left that makes any sense. Sport is their psychological anchor in life.

"Pollster George Gallup, Jr., reports that 'most people feel little satisfaction from what they're getting out of their religion.' Although the number of people who watch televised National Football League

games on any given Sunday still lags behind church attendance, I am quite certain which activity generates the most enthusiasm—and it's not singing 'O Come All ye Faithful.'" Bryjak concludes by quoting those Marxists who say that sport has replaced religion as the "opiate of the people."—*San Diego Union*, November 11, 1986.

Buster Soaries describes us as "an entire country . . . hypnotized by television, mesmerized by music, and anesthetized by drugs and alcohol. . . . While technology grows theology shrinks, and God is reduced to a convenience item for casual use."—*Christianity Today*, September 19, 1986. No wonder Jesus looked ahead to this generation and asked: "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on the earth?" Luke 18:8.

In this amusement and entertainment culture, children have difficulty learning right from wrong—and that spells disaster for human survival on this planet. William Raspberry quotes a *New York Times* story about a school counselor sitting by neutrally while his class concluded that a girl was stupid to return \$1,000 that she had found. The counselor "told them he believed the girl had done the right thing, but that, of course, he would not try to force his values on them. 'If I come from the position of what is right and what is wrong,' [he argued] 'then I'm not their counselor.'"

Education Secretary William Bennett disagrees: "Tough moral basics should be taught in school. . . . A person who is morally literate will be immeasurably better equipped than a morally illiterate person to reach a reasoned and ethically defensible position on these tough issues." Raspberry adds pathetically: "His [Bennett's] idea is so solid that it's hard to imagine that it should be controversial." But in an *anomia* culture, it is! *Anomia*, lawlessness, insists on throwing off restraints both divine and human in order to have its own way.

Is it possible to reverse this deadly process? Can *agape* love be revived after it has grown cold? Can our downward spiral of *anomia* be averted before global suicide occurs?

Yes, by recovering the wholesome sense of self-respect that comes only from a heart appreciation of *agape*. The apostle John reached the highest summit of biblical revelation when he declared that "'God is love [*agape*]." Compared to the riches of knowledge implicit in *agape*, the modern world's scientific and electronic knowledge is intellectual childishness. In *agape* is "all the fullness of God." Ephesians 3:19. That one word, rightly appreciated, would overnight put an end to wars, crime, military spending, selfishness,

and corruption—something that all the scientists and politicians in the world are powerless to accomplish. But the Bible declares that the present world, as a whole, will never accept God's solution to our human problem.

But as individuals we can. The confidence that God loves us with this special kind of self-sacrificing love gives us a true sense of our importance in the sight of Heaven and assures us that we are expatriate citizens of God's unfallen universe. We see ourselves as allies with Heaven, members of "his whole family in heaven and on earth" (Ephesians 3:15), who "participate in the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4), and who are his credentialed ambassadors in a world that has yet to hear His good news.

Can you think of any other idea that could give such a sense of self-worth? A heart appreciation of *agape* is what the New Testament means by the word faith.

Finding the solution to *anomia*—the selfish lawlessness that refuses to submit to God—is not something that we *do* so much as it is something that we *see*. Paul explains: "I pray that you . . . may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp [comprehend] how wide and long and high and deep is the love [*agape*] of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge." Ephesians 3:17-19. Comprehending and appreciating the magnificent dimensions of that love—this is the New Testament idea of salvation by faith! And it is this faith that Jesus says will be so rare in these last days.

Suppose you are hungry, but you have been invited to a sumptuous feast that you know is ready for you. On the way you pass a fruit stand on the sidewalk. Could you bring yourself to steal an apple? I don't think you could do it, as long as you believe that you have a delicious meal waiting for you only a few steps farther.

The person who has grasped the glorious richness of the gospel doesn't have to grit his teeth and force himself unwillingly to turn away from the allurements of the world. The person who knows he has a million dollars in cash will never stoop to look for a nickel lost in the street mire.

The world has wondered how the early Christians could endure the privations and persecutions that came from following Christ in those days of Roman tyranny. We misread history if we assume that it was a mere hope of pie-in-the-sky, an "investment" that required foregoing present good for the return of a greater good to come. That would be next door to selfishness, a what's-in-it-for-me spirit.

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Careful reading of the early church documents discloses the existence of a purer motive—a comprehension of *agape* that transcended all self-centered concern: “Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” 2 Corinthians 5:14, 15.

Good news! Although for “many” in our pleasure-seeking and self-pleasing age that divinely inspired love has grown cold, yet there are also many in all lands who grasp its implications and who feel its constraining motivation as did the early Christians. For these the glitter of sensuality and materialism has lost its appeal. They are motivated by that same love to yield to Christ all their capabilities and resources, demonstrating a devotion that contradicts the “me-first” orientation natural to the human heart.

These people would never claim that they are an iota better than anybody else; they have simply seen something! And once others see it, they too come to know the same joy.

These people are the “salt of the earth,” exercising an influence for good all out of proportion to their numbers, preserving the world from complete deterioration. And this is the reason why Huxley’s and Orwell’s pessimistic prophecies have not yet come true. The presence in the world of at least some people who have the faith of the apostles keeps the entire world from rotting away at the seams.

It is possible for man to partake of this Divine nature, and have this same Godlike feeling toward those around him. We read in Galatians that this love is one of the fruits of the Spirit of God. No other Spirit can bear such fruit. But thanks to the impartial Father of all, we read that *whosoever will* may come and drink of the fountain of life freely. We also read that Jesus is the fountain of life, and that the Holy Spirit is the water of life (Ps. 36:9; John 7:37-39). Then you and I may drink freely of the Spirit of God! You and I can bear the fruits of the Spirit! How? Jesus tells us: “Without Me ye can do nothing.” “Behold, I stand at the door, and knock; if any man hear My voice, and open the door, I will come in to him.” All that we need to do is to open the door. In other words, we are to let Jesus know that He is welcome, that we are willing to give up our ways and our nature, and take His ways and His nature. Then we are assured that He will come

in with His Holy Spirit and abide with us. His Spirit in us will bear the same fruit that it does in Him. Then, and never till then, can we “walk even as He walked,” and love even as He loved, “Because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.” The love of God is unchanging, and therefore will work the same way in our hearts that it does in His heart.

How does one catch the vision? By looking at the magnificent love God has revealed in His Word and by telling Him “Thank You!” By choosing to let His love motivate you to take the first step of faith, letting it bear its fruit of self-denial in you heart and life. By rejoicing to see its power begin to work in you “to will and to act according to his good purpose” rather than your own selfish will. Philippians 2:13. By choosing not to dam up the love which has flowed down to you from God, and letting it flow out from you to someone else. By letting tears of contrition come for all your hardhearted unbelief in the past; by choosing to believe the heart-melting assurance of God’s personal, persistent love for unworthy you.

The reward that you will get, either now or eventually, is not what’s important. Those who have faith in Christ are not looking for a crown to wear; they want to have a part in crowning Him as King of Kings and Lord of lords.

Marsha was getting on in life and experiencing some health problems. She had some background with Seventh-day Adventists, so she felt an inner need for her soul to be fed. She went to church one Sabbath morning and heard a message about God’s mercy, grace, and longsuffering. She had made some bad choices, but she heard that God was drawing her to Himself despite her wrong choices.

Later after the service she saw a Bible in the church lobby and inquired of a passerby whether she could have a Bible. One was found and she became engaged in conversation with two ladies from the church. They called the pastor over and introduced her. She made a decision that she wanted her life to be joined with Jesus.

The following week intending to come to some follow-up meetings, she was stricken with health problems which landed her in the ICU. The Lord gave to Marsha just what she needed on that Sabbath morning. Marsha came to the Hayward SDA Church, Sabbath, Jan. 24, 2009.

Jesus is still asking the question “When the Son of Man comes, will He find faith on the earth?” Imagine His joy when He can answer, “Yes! In you.”