

HOW THE ENEMY STOLE OUR FAITH

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The weapon Satan used to corrupt the idea of *agape* was the pagan notion of the natural immortality of the soul. This idea was almost universal, infiltrating even Judaism, at times. The New Testament idea in contrast is clear-cut: man is by nature mortal and is unconscious in death. Immortality can come only through Christ and can be conferred only at the resurrection from the dead or by experiencing what the Bible calls translation, both of which occur at Christ's second coming.

The notion that man possesses inherent immortality requires the righteous to go to heaven directly at death or, as some would have it, to a half-way station known as purgatory. This teaching also requires that the wicked go directly at death to a place of endless life in incessant torment or torture worse than anything the German Gestapo could invent. It can readily be seen that this doctrine not only by-passes any need for a resurrection from the dead, but also seriously distorts the character of God into what is virtually a deity guilty of sadism.

What is even more serious, this pagan notion neatly destroys the real meaning of the cross of Christ, because it corrupts the idea of the love demonstrated there. If this be true, then obviously Christ could not die on the cross, and God could not truly love the world so much that He gave Him for us—He only lent Him. And Christ could not have died for us a true death, the equivalent of the

“second death.” See Revelation 2:11; 20:14. From this point of view, He merely suffered mental and physical agony as have many soldiers mortally wounded in war, many of whom when He died on the cross. The idea is that Christ only lent Himself to us briefly.

This pagan notion of natural immortality has Christ assuring the thief on the cross that both he and Christ would together share a great reward that very day (the comma placed before the word toward is inserted by translators and has no place in the original Greek). Luke 23:42. While it is true that up to this point Jesus was conscious of ultimate victory, this was not the end or the full measure of His sufferings and death for us. After the episode with the repentant thief, darkness enveloped the cross and Jesus entered the terrible experience of the hiding of His Father's face—something He had never experienced before. It was this that is described as His tasting “death for every man.” Hebrews 2:9.

The Real Meaning of Death

This “death” was not what we superficially assume it to be. What we call death is not the real thing, for the Bible calls it “sleep.” See John 11:11-14 and 1 Thessalonians 4:15-17. Jesus “tasted” the second death “for every man,” the death in which there is no cheering light of hope at all. It's as though every cell of your body, soul, and mind is agonizingly crushed by the horror of a great despair. And for Christ on His cross there was no blessed unconsciousness to block out the full realization of this horrible darkness.

No man since time began has ever felt that full weight of condemnation and despair except our Lord. It was the full weight of the “curse” of God that Paul quoting Moses said rested on “every one that hangeth on a tree” (see Galatians 3:13 and Deuteronomy 21:22, 23), although no other crucified person ever felt it to the full. This is what Isaiah means when he says that Christ “poured out his soul unto death.” Isaiah 53:12.

Can we imagine the horror of a great darkness forever, the aloneness, forsakenness, or eternal separation from the Father, the utter ruin, shame, and humiliation that being lost involves? No, mercifully, we can not comprehend it, for the reason that Another has already “tasted” it for us, drinking the bitter cup in our stead. We would perish if we did taste it. But this is what He endured for us. He was no actor wailing His lines on a stage, pretending what He didn’t truly feel. When He cried out, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46). He meant every syllable of it. Not the pain of nails in His hands and feet, but the horror of that eternal forsakenness killed Him. It was caused by the guilt laid upon Him—the guilt of the accumulated sin of the world.

The point is that “in this was manifested the love [agape] of God toward us.” “Herein is love [agape], not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” 1 John 4:9, 10. Untainted by the Greek notion of natural immortality, the apostles understood what had happened on the cross. There, the “breadth, and length, and depth, and height” of “the [agape]

of Christ which which passeth knowledge” was displayed for the world and the universe to see. See Ephesians 3:18, 19.

With such clear vision, the apostles also sense a mighty power tugging at their human hearts, a force truly phenomenal: “The [agape] of Christ constraineth us [controls us, NASB]; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead: and that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves [that is, they will find it impossible to do so], but unto him which died for them, and rose again.” 2 Corinthians 5:14, 15. Just seeing what that love was resulted in this “constraint” going to work in the heart immediately. Faith was a heart-appreciation of God’s *agape* love.

How the Apostles’ Faith Becomes Ours

We don’t have to be one of the early apostles to “see” with eyes what they saw. Through the Word, the Holy Spirit makes it all come alive for us now. See Galatians 3:1. Our alienated hearts are likewise reconciled to God by faith, and this means that we are also reconciled to God’s law at the same time, for our natural “enmity against God” consists in not being “subject to the law of God.” Romans 8:7. And since “love is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:10), the “faith which worketh by love” (Galatians 5:6) immediately produces obedience to all the commandments of God, including the widely downtrodden Sabbath commandment.

In the time of the apostles, be sure that sensuality, materialism, the love of money and luxury, living for

one's own self were as powerful temptations as they are today! Our pitiful struggles to overcome these temptations they would have considered nonsense. What they did know was that faith worked, like a bomb exploding. We think it so hard to follow Christ, to sacrifice for Him; they would have pitied our lack of understanding. What they had was New Testament justification by faith, which turned the world upside down and crucified the world unto them. See Galatians 6:14.

Can you guess why Satan would want to eliminate that constraint of love? This was behind his efforts in the early Christian era to distort and confuse this idea of *agape* until Christ had to sorrowfully say to the church of Ephesus (the early church), "Thou hast left thy first love [*agape*]." Revelation 2:4. Many of the church fathers lost its meaning, so much so that Plotinus in the third century rejected the idea that God is *agape* and boldly declared Him to be the Hellenistic idea of self-centered love based on natural immortality. So entrenched had the apostasy from love become by the fifth century, that Augustine, father of Medieval Romanism, synthesized the conflicting New Testament and Hellenistic ideas of love into what he called *caritas*, which became the basis of medieval Romanist doctrine.

Contrary to Augustine's intentions, it produced a deplorable system of salvation by meritorious works because it was egocentric in nature.

The worst tragedy came later. Protestantism generally inherited Augustine's idea and perpetuated within itself the same principle of self-

centeredness. Thus the idea of justification by faith commonly held by the Reformers contained the seed of its own eventual corruption. It is no wonder that Revelation addresses the Reformation church of Sardis as the one who has "a name that thou livest, and art dead." Revelation 3:1.

Luther, however, in the sixteenth century rejected the pagan notion of natural immortality, and consequently began to break down Augustine's synthesis and to restore New Testament *agape*. Luther's grasp of the biblical truth of the nature of man enabled him at times to have a clear understanding of justification by faith. But Calvin and other Reformers clung to the pagan-papal doctrine, as did Luther's colleagues and descendants. With their idea of the love of God thus crippled, it is easy to see how their idea of faith was likewise maimed. They were never able to escape that tethered radius of a self-centered faith and get back to the grand New Testament idea.

Their concern was always overshadowed by their sense of insecurity and fear. "How can I be sure I can escape the tortures of hell? How can I be sure I will get a reward in heaven?" were of necessity questions uppermost in their minds. It was not their fault; they were grand men. They had simply inherited a false doctrine of the nature of man. Their ideas of justification by faith were always tinged by self-concern and a horrible fear of eternal torture and torment; and lurking beneath the surface was the idea of a vengeful, angry God who hardly deserved the name of Father. The apostle John saw how "perfect [*agape*] casteth out fear" (1 John

4:18), but this they could not really comprehend; obsessed as they were by their doctrine of natural immortality, they could only work toward degrading their concept of Christ's sacrifice. Their egocentric search for security was unavoidable. They could never break through the mists to see New Testament righteousness by faith in all its majestic grandeur.

So confused were many of the Calvinists that they distorted the New Testament to make it teach that an arbitrary God predestined one to be saved regardless of his unbelief, and another to be lost regardless of his faith. For all practical purposes, this brand of Calvinism degraded justification by faith into justification by arbitrary predestination. Such broken cisterns are hardly a pure source of the water of life! This does not impugn the sincerity or devotion of the Reformers of previous centuries. The kindest thing to say is that they were sincerely but unknowingly confused by their inheritance of a pagan-papal error.

The Reformers Who Almost Succeeded

The Wesleys almost broke through the confusion into the light. They rejected the Calvinist form of predestination, and their concept of the character of God was immeasurably superior. But they were still confused by the notion of natural immortality which in subtle ways beneath the surface still worked to distort for them the full truth of the gospel and to hold them to some extent bound by egocentric concern.

It may be said of them all what Hebrews says of earlier generations, that God has "provided some

better thing for us" (Hebrews 11:40) in the end of time. "The road the righteous travel is like the sunrise, getting brighter and brighter until daylight has come." Proverbs 4:28, TEV. But God honored "the angel of the church" of the Reformers, for He promised, "I will give him the morning star." Revelation 2:28.

Scattered here and there in the centuries since Luther were a few individuals who saw clearly and spoke boldly enough to reject the pagan doctrine of natural immortality. The New Testament doctrine of life only in Christ—conditional immortality—was often derided by its numerous opponents as Mortalism. Bryan Ball says of some of its adherents in England: "In 1646 Richard Overton was sent to the Tower for having written a book which explained the Mortalist viewpoint, and in 1658 Thomas Hall listed Mortalism as one of the 'devilish' errors of the time. It . . . had been condemned as heretical in the Forty-two Articles of Religion of 1553."—*The English Connection*, p. 159.

In the last days there must be a full recovery of "the everlasting gospel" of justification by faith as both Abraham and Paul experienced it. And it must be a vast multitude of "every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people" who say "with a loud voice, Fear God, and give glory to him; for the hour of his judgment is come: and worship him that made heaven and earth." Revelation 14:6, 7. It is impossible to worship Him "in spirit and in truth" (see John 4:23), unless His character of true love is clearly perceived as free from pagan-papal distortion. And "the hour of his judgment" is not the

hour when in sadistic vengeance He condemns the world. He expressly said He would not do that. See John 5:22; 12:47, 48. It is the hour when He Himself is acquitted and vindicated, when the mists of distortion and misrepresentation concerning Him are at last blown away by the full truth.

Here is predicted the full recovery of New Testament *agape*, which alone makes the everlasting gospel to come into its own. Significantly, the fruitage of this revival of the gospel is the development of a people who are characterized as “they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus.” Revelation 14:12. Only “[*agape*] is the fulfilling of the law” (Romans 13:10); and here again New Testament faith is seen as a human heart-appreciation of the cross. Keeping the commandments for the saints is no fear-inspired search for security or assurance. It is the automatic expression of their appreciation of Calvary. They simply glory “in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom the world is crucified unto” them, and they “unto the world.” Galatians 6:14. They know they live only because “One died for all.” New Testament faith sees the grave as one’s only rightfully earned reward. Everything else that we have is ours only by grace. And in this faith is a guarantee of happiness and the end of repining, jealousy, selfishness. They cannot exist in company with faith! And obedience becomes as natural as daybreak following night.

The people of the last days who are “saints” in God’s sight feel the grateful appreciation that

moved Elizabeth Clephane to write her hymn “Beneath the Cross of Jesus”:

There lies beneath its shadow,
But on the farther side,
The darkness of an awful grave
That gapes both deep and wide;
And there between us stands the cross
Two arms outstretched to save,
Like a watchman set to guard the way
From that eternal grave.

Upon the cross of Jesus
Mine eye at times can see
The very dying form of One
Who suffered there for me;
And from my smitten heart with tears
Two wonders I confess:
The wonders of redeeming love,
And my unworthiness.

I take, O cross, thy shadow
For my abiding place;
I ask no other sunshine than
The sunshine of His face;
Content to let the world go by,
To know no gain nor loss,
My sinful self my only shame,
My glory all the cross!

Elizabeth Clephane could have served well as Paul’s singing evangelist! She saw what he saw: “faith which worketh by love” kills every form of human selfishness at its root. A believing heart

responds not a whit less than to say with Isaac Watts: "Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my life, my soul, my all!" This is justification by faith. And nothing less can be worthy of the name.