

# THE TRUE CHURCH

By Paul Penno Jr.

March 26, 2011

If you want some bad news, just read your newspaper or watch the news on TV. What you want is an *hors d'oeuvre*, a tidbit, of good news. Well, in order to get some good news out of the horror that is central stage today, is to remember what Rev. 18:2, 3 says: "Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils, and the hold of every foul spirit, and a cage of every unclean and hateful bird. For all nations have drunk the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth are waxed rich through the abundance of her delicacies."

No matter how you look at the news pouring out of the White House concerning the most powerful man on earth, and the fact that the people by and large are happy because they are waxing rich through the abundance of delicacies we enjoy, you have to recognize the fulfillment of that prophecy.

Babylon is fallen because of a rejection of truth. That precisely is what has caused this abysmal "fall." Parents are afraid even to let their children see a newspaper or hear a newscast! But there's a morsel of good news in the fact that there are still some few people in government who say openly that this scandal must not be swept under the rug—"truth is important." Yes, thank God, *truth is important*.

And that brings us to the Good News in that sordid prophecy in Revelation 18: the next verse speaks of a voice that calls to every truth-loving soul in "Babylon," "Come out of her My people." And where are those truth-loving people to go? To the remnant church that keeps the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus. The Good News is that *truth is important to that remnant church*. And truth-loving people in the church are waking up to realize that the lighting of the earth with the glory of the message of Christ's righteousness demands that truth be ferreted out,

accepted by humble repentant hearts, and proclaimed faithfully.

Thoughtful observers say that our world as well as our nation are deeply divided. The result: strife, national division, and bitterness. There's something else that deeply concerns committed Christians: they are as about evenly divided in their understandings of Bible truth, maybe the same .00052 per cent.

For example, many Christians are 50/50 on which day is the true Sabbath of the Lord; on what happens when a person dies; on what kind of punishment awaits the lost—eternal conscious torment or eternal death; on modern Israel's legitimate divine claim to the land of Palestine.

And even in the church that claims to be "the remnant" preparing for the second coming of Jesus there are 50/50 divisions on who Jesus is—what kind of human nature did He "take"; on "the king of the north" and on the identity of "the daily" in Daniel—whether it's the work of Satan or the work of Christ; on what Christ accomplished by His sacrifice—has He *given a gift* of acceptance and justification to "all men" or merely *offered* it; on whether works bring merit; etc.

Little wonder that many throw up their hands in dismay and choose to forget doctrine and just do good works to help the poor. If "God is not the author of confusion" (1 Cor. 14:33), then the devil is, and confusion is part of his agenda in "the great controversy between Christ and Satan." Although it is true that Jesus says to help the poor, He also said, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free" (Jn. 8:32), obviously a preparation to meet the final perplexing test of the mark of the beast.

Paul says that in the end everything depends on discerning between the pure, true gospel and its clever counterfeit. "I marvel that ye are so soon removed from him that called you into the grace of Christ unto another gospel: Which is not another; but there be some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed. As we

said before, so say I now again, If any man preach any other gospel unto you than that ye have received, let him be accursed" (Gal. 1:6-9). A majority vote in the church won't determine what truth is; but we can have confidence that an honest-hearted world church will come to discern what the truth is, and unitedly proclaim it to the world.

There are many religions in the world. Only one claims relevance for the entire world and embodies a built-in compulsion for its proclamation to the world: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" (Jn. 3:16). "This is indeed . . . the Saviour of the world" (4:42). "The bread of God is He which . . . giveth life unto the world"; "the bread that I will give is My flesh, which I will give for the life of the world" (6:33, 51). "There is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (there's the compulsion, Acts 4:12). "The gospel is God's power to save all who believe, first the Jews and also the Gentiles" (Rom. 1:16, GNB). "God our Saviour . . . will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim. 2:3, 4). He "is the Saviour of all men, especially of those that believe" (4:10). "He is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 Jn. 2:2). "The everlasting gospel to preach unto them that dwell on the earth, and to every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people" (Rev. 14:6).

Not all will be eternally saved, for many choose to disbelieve and reject. When this religion was announced by an angel, he proclaimed, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (Lk. 2:14).

Jews and Arabs in the Middle East need to know about it; so do both Republicans and Democrats; so do blacks and whites; Orientals and Westerners; rich and poor; young and old. Iraq needs to hear it. No other knowledge can successfully counteract the evil that threatens life and happiness on earth today. The proclamation of this saving knowledge is entrusted to a remnant church in the last days (Rev. 14:12; 12:17).

A repentance symbolized by a mighty angel will make possible its proclamation, says Revelation 18, and for a brief

time the entire world will be "lightened with his glory" (vss. 1-4). But never do we read that the entire world will accept the message! The *Titanic* will sink; but "whosoever believeth shall not perish." That number who will believe may be more than we have realized.

The popular magazine *Christianity Today* asks in big letters on the cover, "What in the World Is God Doing?" It answers (of course) "find out" by re-subscribing to our magazine. But the question is far more than a clever advertising ploy. Millions of thoughtful people worldwide who want to believe in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ are anxiously wondering: where is He, and what He is doing today? We are firmly convinced that He answers this question so clearly in the Bible that even a child can understand:

He is busy fighting the last battle of a "great controversy between Christ and Satan." The outline is clear in Revelation 12; step by step we trace the history of His church through the last 2000 years down to the time of "the remnant" who are distinguished as they "which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ" (vs. 17; "the faith of Jesus," 14:12).

In fighting this war with Satan, God is contending for the heart-commitment of His people; He can never win the conflict unless He has succeeded in winning a corporate body to be so truly on His side that He can honestly say, they "are with Him" (17:14). Therefore, what God is "doing in the world" is winning honest hearts to "be . . . reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5:19). It's the most difficult spiritual struggle He's had in all the millennia since sin began. That's where reality is!

It was never God's plan that "Israel," ancient or modern, should poison the world with hatred and violence. His promise to Abraham regarding his descendants (through "Isaac") was, "Thou shalt be a blessing, . . . and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 12:2, 3). The promise was fulfilled "in Christ," but the world still awaits the "blessing" of peace that God's people were to bring.

According to the Bible, "Israel" still exists, but not as a nation of literal Jews. Revelation says that the "twelve tribes"

are still out there being “sealed, . . . of all nations, and people, and tongues” (7:1-9). The seal is a final vindication “of the living God” placed upon those who “overcome even as [Christ] overcame.” They are “the remnant” of the true “Israel” of all ages who are Abraham’s true descendants by faith in Christ (12:17). But they do not bring hatred and bloodshed into the world! They minister to the world in the name of the One who is “the Prince of peace.”

According to Revelation 7, their proclamation of the sealing message makes it possible for God to “hold the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth” until “another angel . . . having the seal of God . . . seal[s] the servants of our God in their foreheads.”

Conclusion: nothing could be more important than for “Israel” of today to hear, to understand, and then to proclaim that “sealing message,” free from “Babylon’s” confusion. Nothing else can bring “peace in our time.”

Caught red-handed in a kind of rape and then adultery and murder, King David tasted hell on earth. In anguish he pleaded, “O God, do not take your Holy Spirit from me” (Ps. 51:11). He had caught a glimpse of the horror of life without the Holy Spirit. What does a nation face if the same Holy Spirit of God is withdrawn? Example: Jerusalem in the last years of its existence as a kingdom under Jehoahaz, Jehoichin, Jehoikim, and Zedekiah (2 Chron. 36). It was God’s “church” on earth in total pagan apostasy “till there was no remedy” (vs. 16). Another example: the world in Noah’s day when “the earth was corrupt . . . and filled with violence” (Gen. 6:12, 13). Can a modern “Christian” nation descend to a similar fate where there is “no remedy” left to save it from its own violence? The Holy Spirit is a gift God has given to the world, not just to His church (see John 16:7, 8, “He will convict the world of sin”). That restrains the total outbreak of violent evil; remove Him who ministers the conviction of sin, and hell on earth breaks out. In ancient Judah, the people forced God to withdraw the restraint of His Holy Spirit, and kings and leaders and people lost even their common sense. The result: ruin for the nation. In Noah’s day, God said that His Holy Spirit “shall not always

strive [abide] with man” (Gen. 6:3), and the people living in the paradise that “the world that then was” went wild with sinful abandon. The result: ruin. But there’s still some Good News. God has always had a few, a “remnant,” who listen to the Holy Spirit, and those few have often held back as a dike restraining flood waters, the overflow of evil: “When the enemy comes in like a flood, the Spirit of the Lord will lift up a standard against him” (Isa. 59:19). That Hebrew word “standard” implies lifting up a flag, the mere sight of which frightens the enemy. That “standard” is God’s true church on earth with its message. And it’s time for the church itself to pray David’s agonizing prayer: “O God, do not take Your Holy Spirit from us!” History shows it is possible for a church to “insult” the Holy Spirit and drive Him from their midst, leaving their beautiful buildings and organs. The church is “the salt of the earth,” says Jesus (Mt. 5:13). If it loses its “saltiness,” then it is “good for nothing,” He said; and then, what’s left for the earth itself? Nothing to preserve it from the hell Satan wants to bring.

Suppose any Christian denomination claims to be the ONE true church described in the Bible: would such a claim be necessarily arrogant? \*Is there is no one TRUE church on earth? And suppose somewhere on earth ONE true church does meet the doctrinal criteria in the Bible, but it is so plagued with internal confusion and apostasy and backsliding that it can make no credible claim before the world, does that mean that it will never be healed and purified? Bible teaching may seem at present unattained, but that does not mean that it is unattainable, given the leading and ministry of the Holy Spirit of God plus that there are at least some people on earth who are honest at heart who will respond to His leading. (If the latter is not true, then it must be obvious that Christ died for nothing!)

Scripture speaks of “one body, and one Spirit, . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph. 4:4, 5). It speaks of a people who “keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus” (Rev. 14:12), a “remnant . . . seed” emerging after centuries of the Dark Ages as those distinguished who “keep the commandments of God and [who] have the testimony of

Jesus” (12:17). They are distinct from “Babylon,” a false system of worship that will deceive “all that dwell upon the earth” except those “whose names are written in the Lamb’s Book of life” (13:8). They will bear a witness to earth and heaven that it is possible for an organized, corporate “body” of believers in Christ to “follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth” who stand displayed before the universe as a corporate body “in [whose] mouth is found no guile, for they are without fault before the throne of God” (14:4, 5). They will eventually be the fulfillment of Paul’s vision of a “glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing, but . . . holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:27). In all honesty, one must admit that there is no such “spotless church” on earth today, but if the Bible is true, someday there will be. What will accomplish such a transformation? (a) There’s a hint in Eph. 5:2: the proclamation of *agape*, which (2) will result in the experience of justification by faith (Rom. 5:8-11). If such a “church” is reconciled to God, it will also be reconciled to God’s holy law. Good News—that’s coming.

Another Bible prophecy is concerned with peace: Revelation 7:1-4. After describing the great signs that indicate the time of the end is near (6:12-17), ch. 7 describes events in the last days when terrible violence is seething like a cauldron below the surface in human hearts world-wide. It is symbolized by “the four winds of the earth,” a tornado of passion that is about to break loose. Four heavenly angels are commissioned to “hold” those “four winds” as one might hold a team of wild horses. Then another angel comes on the scene “from the east” crying with a loud voice to the four angels, “Hold,” “Hurt not the earth . . . till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads.” Thus is symbolized the proclamation of a message that prepares a people to be ready, not only for death, but for the literal second coming of Christ. The symbolism is vivid, like a cartoon explaining in a few words the meaning of world history today. God has entrusted to His people on earth, His “remnant” of Revelation 12:17 and 14:12 the work of proclaiming the “sealing message.” If they will be faithful in proclaiming “the everlasting gospel” in a

way that the message can prepare a people for translation, then the Lord says He will do His part and “hold” or restrain those terrible “four winds” of war. The “sealing” truth is not a watered down message borrowed from Babylon, but the authentic gospel that Paul says “is the power of God unto salvation,” “the message of Christ’s righteousness” (Rom. 1:16).

Some may ask, “What is this great ‘Day of Atonement’ when God calls for a special repentance from His people?” It is His final work in the Most Holy Apartment of the heavenly sanctuary. Christ Himself as great High Priest in His sanctuary is totally dedicated to bringing an end to the sin and suffering on this earth. Are we not called to understand, to be in full sympathy with Him?

The cosmic Day of Atonement is just what its name says—the Day of final reconciliation (“atonement” means at-one-with). It is not a difficult idea to grasp:

(1) It’s when the alienated heart of humanity is at last fully reconciled to God and His holy law. Not that every human will submit to this work of “at-one-with”; many will refuse to their bitter end. But the Lord will succeed in winning a “remnant” to full oneness with Himself.

(2) They will demonstrate what “all men” could experience if only they would. This “remnant” will at last fully appreciate Christ for what He is. They will “grow up” out of the immaturity of “children” “unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,” “speaking the truth in love [*agape*]” (Eph. 4:13-15). Thus as their peers, in principle, they will “judge” all humanity.

(3) Opposed and ridiculed, they will “follow the Lamb [the crucified Christ] whithersoever He goeth. . . . In their mouth was found no guile: for they are without fault before the throne of God” (Rev. 14:1-5). This is generally thought of as an impossible chimera. But if it doesn’t happen, Christ will forever remain embarrassed and discredited. He died specifically to achieve this goal.

(4) But this “remnant” will never be conscious that they honor Christ. The more like Him they grow to be through sanctification of the Spirit, the more unworthy will they feel

themselves to be. In the final Judgment they will not assume that Christ is inviting them, “Come, ye blessed of My Father.” They will look around expecting Him to call others, not themselves (see Matt. 25:31-40).

(5) Fully at-one with Him, a group will “overcome even as [He] overcame” (Rev. 3:21). His Bride will have “made herself ready” for “the marriage of the Lamb” (19:1-8). Finally—His triumph!

(6) Then at last the sacrifice of Christ will have been fully vindicated—He, not they, glorified.

(7) Daniel and Revelation clearly teach that the hour of this great Day of Atonement is *now*.

The Bible teaches fidelity in marriage. Paul says, “Let every man have his own wife, and every woman have her own husband, . . . and let not the wife depart from her husband, . . . and let not the husband put away his wife” (1 Cor. 7:2, 11). What God wants to see is a life-long union. Why? (1) He wants us to be happy, and fidelity in marriage brings happiness. (2) The lasting prosperity and stability of a nation depend on upholding solid family values.

Fidelity in sexual relationship opens a window where we can see the relationship of Jesus Christ to humanity. His name is “Immanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us” (Mt. 1:23). The Son of God has fallen in love with the church, which is that remnant of humanity who have come to appreciate His love for humanity. In Ephesians 3 Paul has prayed a profound prayer that the Father would grant His church “to comprehend” the grand dimensions of the love of Christ, *agape* “which passeth knowledge”; then in chapter 5 he tells us that the love of a husband for his wife is a reflection of that of Christ for His church. “A great mystery”?

Yes, and a solemn, holy one, no topic for jokes; and in this great Day of Atonement the “mystery” is unfolding. While the world is sinking steadily ever deeper into the morass (or shall I say cesspool) of sexual depravity, the Holy Spirit is lifting a people higher and higher into a concern that the deepest yearnings of the Son of God for His people be understood, appreciated, and realized in preparing for “the marriage of the Lamb.” Yes, two opposite phenomena

displayed before our eyes: the worldly ones becoming ever more corrupt, and a remnant church becoming ever more Christlike. Which side do you choose to dwell in?