

WHY WE SEE THE NATURE OF CHRIST AS A LIFE OR DEATH ISSUE

By Paul Penno Jr.
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Think of yourself fleeing for your life, and your only hope of escape is to get through a traffic bottleneck at the one river crossing that is open. The military have set up a checkpoint. Your “passport” to avoid death is to prove your identity by speaking an elusive dialect, something like trilling your Rs to prove you are a true Scot. Can you say “Shibboleth”? Or have you always since babyhood pronounced it “Sibboleth”?

You can’t fake it. Your head will roll unless you can say it just right. Some 42,000 Ephraimites “fell” at the Jordan because they couldn’t say the word to satisfy the military guards (Judges 12:5, 6).

Through history, a shibboleth has come to be a kind of linguistic password: A way of speaking or writing that identifies one as a member of a group. Today, it has also come to mean a point of difference and division. A person whose way of speaking or believing, as evidenced by actions, violates a shibboleth and is therefore identified as an outsider and thereby excluded by the group. It is “to draw a line in the sand.”

Is the nature of Christ our Adventist “Shibboleth”? Are we dividing ourselves over trifles in words, anathematizing others who just can’t say it right? Says a reporter: “Congregations have parted; friends separated. Are such differences all that important?” (May, 1997).

We are not concerned with settling intricate word problems in a theoretical way. And we don’t disfellowship anyone. We are not scholars, theologians, or historians—just simple teachers who belong in the Bay area where we have been sent to serve by the Lord. As bottom-of-the-ladder workers we see our task assigned us by the church is to *prepare the Hayward Church for the second coming of Christ*. Serious business! It is in the Bay area that we learned to view this controversy on the nature of Christ from the perspectives of soul-winning, pastoral ministry, and we have been forced to see it as virtually a life or death issue.

It surely appears on the surface as though the gospel of Jesus does not have power to save people from their sensuality. Why does humanity find the 7th commandment of God’s ten so difficult to obey even where the gospel supposedly is preached? Why do so many pastors fall into adultery?

There are two outstanding reasons: (1) The “popular” gospel denies that Christ took our identical same fallen sinful flesh, in which “He was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15). A false gospel separates Jesus from the human race He came to save, teaching people that He can only save us *in* our sins, not *from* them. If He was not tempted to sensuality like as we are tempted, then Heb 2:18 says clearly that He cannot save us from sensuality. In contrast, the true gospel insists that He saves sinners *from* their sins, and gives the complete victory over sinful temptation. (2) The real meaning of the cross of Christ is

hidden, obscured, and even denied, by the pagan doctrine of natural immortality that has crept into the Christian church, imported from ancient paganism. That pagan doctrine denies that Christ truly died our second death, on His cross; it leaves His glorious sacrifice beclouded, restricted, confused.

Only a clear view of the cross and what it cost the Son of God to save us, can save humans from the deep-rooted sins of sex and sensuality, including the intemperate indulgence of appetite. People think the personal battle is too difficult; but Jesus says “My yoke is easy” if we have seen what His cross means. Yes, the gospel is the power of God unto salvation (Rom 1:16).

Someone says, “Wait a minute! Jesus couldn’t be tempted to be selfish, could He? We don’t want to make Him *too* human, do we?” In response we need to note several things:

(1) To be tempted is not the same as to sin. Temptation is not sin; a thousand temptations do not equal one sin. Therefore Jesus could “in all points [be] tempted like as we are” yet not never once give in to commit sin (Heb. 4:15).

(2) Jesus did for sure become human; and we dare not limit His humanity, for John tells us that if we do, we end up being Antichrist (1 John 4:1-3). He was “in all things . . . made like unto His brethren” (Heb. 2:17). His name is “Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us” (Matt. 1:23)—humanity combined with divinity.

(3) Further, we must remember that the humanity which Christ became, Himself to be [or assumed], was not the sinless, unfallen humanity of Adam in

Eden. He came from heaven specifically to solve the problem of sin where it dwells in fallen, sinful human nature. If He sidesteps taking that same humanity where the problem is for all of us, He opens Himself up to the charge of being unfair in the contest. Who could believe a dishonest Savior?

(4) We must remember that temptation to indulge self was as strong for Him as it is for us—stronger in fact. Nobody could have more fervently abhorred being crucified, than was Jesus. His whole soul shrunk from the ordeal. Listen to Him pray, “O My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from Me” (Matt. 26:39). Sweet little, mild prayer? No, read on: He screamed, He shook like in an earthquake, David says He “cried out” (Ps. 22:1, 2; 69:3). He sweat actual drops of blood (have you, ever? Luke 22:44).

(5) This perfect “likeness” of His nature with yours and mine, His humanity being formed with a self as is ours—a self which had to be denied if He should follow His Father’s will—all this makes Jesus our perfect Savior, “able to save perfectly those who come unto God by Him” (Heb. 7:25).

Are you having a battle with self? So did He! Have you ever given in to self? He did not! But the reason why He “ever liveth” is to give you and me forgiveness *and* victory.

We hadn’t been here long before we ran into a perplexing, even discouraging, problem: disciplining church members who were committing fornication and adultery, including a few leaders, teachers and pastors. It can be a plague beyond any reasonable management. Isn’t the Seventh-day Adventist

Church supposed to be the remnant one where the saints “keep the commandments of God”?

Some fellow workers may advise us to look the other way; this is a counterculture where people can't help being what they are. (Well, without a Savior, who of us can help being what we are?)

We began to realize that “preaching the law, the law, until we were as dry as the hills of Gilboa” (to borrow Ellen White's phrase) wasn't the solution. Fear of venereal disease or even fear of hell-fire didn't seem to deter the immorality. The people already lived in a saturation element of fear from birth to death. Sincere Christians who didn't want to “fall” just couldn't handle sexual temptations. There wasn't much else to live for other than sex. But shouldn't Paul's letters to the Corinthians solve the same problems?

We could administer church discipline, but it became a dreary, repetitive task like running the Ambulance Service at the bottom of the cliff, picking up the broken people and trying to restore them; where was the fence up at the top to keep people from falling over?

Pastors today confess wrestling with the same frustrations. While visiting by e-mail with one recently, he confided that this same problem is what distresses him. San Francisco is the AIDS capital of the US. It is heart-rending for us to have to watch innocent youth grow to their teenage years and see them stumble into the sexual traps that leave ugly scars on their personality ever afterwards, even though their “culture” may accept such tragedies as “normal.” Look in those sad faces in the media

photographs, see the pain of fear and guilt; the law of God speaks its condemnation to “every man.” Pagan or Christian, each has heard its voice. As human beings they cannot avoid feeling the conviction of sin even as they cannot understand how it comes upon them.

Before I was sent to Hayward I had chanced upon a some *Glad Tidings*, and my soul was thrilled with its heart-warming presentation of a Savior from sin who can reach souls lowest down in the pit because He suffered being tempted as they are tempted, “yet without sin.” I knew that I had found the gospel of Christ's righteousness stated in attention-grabbing language. How could I share this message of “glad tidings” with my brothers and sisters?

I had read far enough to grasp the point: Christ has set us free; He has delivered us from slavery under sin; He has “condemned” it “in the likeness of sinful flesh;” He has rendered sin *passe*, as out of date as an ox-cart; there is no excuse for anyone in the world to go on living in sin if he understands and believes how good this Good News is; Satan has been vanquished, not merely attacked; it's too late to go on saying “Satan made me do it!” as many were telling me; the gospel is not impotent, it is the power of God (“dynamite,” Greek) unto salvation; you can't go on living for self if you appreciate the length, breadth, depth, and height of the love (*agape*) of Christ revealed at the cross. Preaching about the punishment they must suffer for their sins didn't faze them (longer than perhaps a week). They needed something else.

Preaching about the punishment that *Christ* suffered for their sins was effective. Why He had to die was the only truth that seemed to get through to troubled hearts. Even the non-Adventist teachers are casting about for some gospel that can save people from their moral degradation. Sometimes pastors lament publicly that brides who march down their church aisles are pregnant. Here in Christian America it seemed that precious few could escape falling into the morass of sexual immorality, and needless to say, that led to every other kind of corruption as well.

Now we realize that this problem of sexual sin *is the world's* problem. Says Reo M. Christenson, writing in *Spectrum*:

“Fornication causes more suffering in America than theft and perjury and random violence combined. . . . High rates of illegitimacy, single-parent families, school drop-outs following pregnancies, subsequent entries onto welfare rolls plus their children who get involved in crime, drugs, poor educational performance, and often lifelong poverty. Think of the parental distress all this brings, too. Add these up and the reader can see why I think fornication is an evil far greater than modern society likes to acknowledge. It is sad that even churches [Seventh-day Adventist?] are unwilling to give this sin the attention it so richly deserves” (Vol. 24, No. 2, p. 64).

Even when those with the “know-how” practice contraception or abortion, the scars upon the soul remain and poison the after-life. Jesus described this truly awful state of the world when He said,

“Because iniquity shall abound, the love of many shall wax cold” (Matt. 24:12). Marriages are poisoned even if they survive and children sense the loveless alienations. Fornication and adultery are a neutron bomb that spiritually kills souls while leaving our glittering homes and cities standing in their material grandeur apparently unscathed, with desolated souls “dead” in the midst of material wealth.

While I was struggling and praying about our problem, a key element in *the Good News* became crystal clear: the biblical truth of the nature of Christ is a soul-winning message. The sinless Son of God came all the way down to where we are sunken in sin. He took our fallen, sinful spiritual nature, and lived therein a sinless life, enduring even our spiritual alienation from God as He cried out on the cross, “My God, why have You forsaken Me?” “As the children are partakers of flesh and blood, He also Himself likewise took part of the same; . . . In all things it behoved Him to be made like unto His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people” (Heb. 2:14-17).

Romanism and Protestantism in general denied this precious truth, for Romanism taught a dogma of the Immaculate Conception (the source of terrible sexual immorality) that says the opposite, and Protestants retained a similar idea of “exemption” for Christ even as they retained the Sunday Sabbath from the “mother church.” Instead of preaching a Christ who was “nigh at hand” and not

“far off” (as Ellen White articulated the good news), their “christ” belonged in stained glass windows “far off” from reality when dusk falls.

I began to wonder what our Seventh-day Adventist Christians thought about Jesus. I decided to ask the congregations some questions:

“Do you believe that Jesus in His incarnation was tempted as we are?”

“Oh yes.”

“Was He tempted to lie, steal, break the Sabbath, etc.?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Was He tempted to break the seventh commandment?”

Then came the answer, firm and unmistakable: “Oh, no, impossible!”

I knew I had found the source of the problem. No Savior!

Their “christ” was the popular one of the prominent Roman Catholic evangelist Fulton Sheen and his Protestant friends who across the gulf clasp the hand of Rome. This “Christ” was “different” from the fallen human race, being “exempt” from the genetic inheritance of all fallen descendants of Adam. Sheen, the Roman Catholic, makes clear what his church teaches everywhere:

“Mary was desolidarized and separated from that sin-laden humanity. . . . Had there been no Immaculate Conception, then Christ would have been said to be less beautiful, for He would have taken His Body from one who was not humanly perfect! There ought to be an infinite separation between God and sin. . . .

“How could [Christ] be sinless if He was born of sin-laden humanity? If a brush dipped in black becomes black, and if cloth takes on the color of the dye, would not He, in the eyes of the world, have also partaken of the guilt in which all humanity shared? If He came to this earth through the wheatfield of moral weakness, He certainly would have some chaff hanging on the garment of His human nature” (*The World’s First Love*, pp. 15, 16, 48).

Sheen’s apparently faultless logic has appealed to numerous Seventh-day Adventist writers in recent decades. If Christ took our fallen, sinful nature, how could He be sinless? And how then could He be our sinless Substitute? Wouldn’t He Himself need a Savior?

The Bible doctrine of Christ’s righteousness eluded this Roman Catholic evangelist: he cannot see how Christ saves *from* sin, not *in* sin because He “condemned” sin in fallen, sinful flesh, and thus outlawed it forever. There’s a reason why “the blood . . . of all that were slain upon the earth” is “found” at last in the final judgment to be in Babylon (Rev. 18:24).

But like Sheen, some of our own writers fail to see the essential core of New Testament righteousness by faith. Christ could not be our sinless Substitute unless He has bridged that awful gap of being “desolidarized” from the human race, and had fought and won our battle *where we are*. Somehow they think such complete identity with us in our temptations must compromise His sinlessness. A former editor of a pastor’s magazine wrote: “You

can never make me believe that Christ was ever tempted to break the seventh commandment.” In response, “Then according to the message of Hebrews, we have no Savior from that temptation! Our only hope is an Ambulance at the bottom of the cliff.”

To multitudes of sin-sick souls the Roman Catholic “Christ” brings no Good News. He had not “suffered being tempted” as they are; He can not be “touched with the feeling of [their] weaknesses” and therefore can not “succor” [aid] them when they are tempted, for He was not “in all points tempted like as [they] are.” All He can do is keep on pardoning their continued unavoidable sinning. I finally realized that my friends desperately needed a glimpse of the true Christ.

Let’s not kid ourselves into thinking that this is only America’s problem; it’s the world’s as well.

A copy of *The Consecrated Way to Christian Perfection*, presents a heart-warming message from Hebrews chapters 2 to 4. Only in that wherein Christ “Himself hath suffered being tempted [is] He able to succor them that are tempted. . . . We have not an high priest who cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities [moral, not merely tiredness from physical labor!]; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (2:18; 4:15). I sensed that the common idea of justification by faith just didn’t “fly”. Justification by faith is not merely a legal declaration of acquittal, as the American Christians thought, wonderful as that may be; Rome taught that all they had to do was to keep on confessing their moral falls, get “pardon,” and then

go right on giving in to the flesh again. Isn’t Jesus sweet, kind, and merciful? Even the Muslims are saying that Allah is “compassionate.” God knows it’s impossible not to keep on sinning, not if “you’re human.”

About that time I also discovered the idea of *agape*. I began to fall in love with the glory of the cross of Christ. Then I saw in the heart-warming story of Mary Magdalene a “patron saint” for us, and began to proclaim this message to my brothers and sisters:

(1) Christ *knows* your temptations, even that of breaking the seventh commandment, and He “succors” you and lifts you out of that swamp if you understand and believe the gospel as good news;

(2) look at the grand dimensions of the *agape* that led the Son of God to go to hell to save you, to die your second death (not just suffer physical pain), to endure being “cursed of God” as He was “hanged on a tree,” and your “lust of the flesh, and the lust of your eyes, and the pride of life” will cease to enslave you;

(3) the story of Mary Magdalene defines for you what “faith” is all about—a heart-appreciation of Christ’s love for you—it’s not another works trip;

(4) justification by faith therefore is more than a legal pardon or acquittal that frees you to go on sinning again; it actually delivers you practically, genuinely, from bondage to sin;

(5) the “curse of the law” is not obedience to the law but disobedience to it—and that’s what you’re saved from;

(6) justification by faith is an experience that actually makes you become obedient to all the commandments of God. It's the greatest joy that a human being can know! It transcends every other pleasure.

Did it work? I didn't accomplish anything, but the gospel did, for it is indeed the power of God unto salvation to those who believe. I found that my brethren are as capable of truly "believing" as anyone on earth and as capable of manifesting the fruit of such "faith which works by *agape*."

We are by nature are no better than anybody else on earth. But the Lord has given them "a most precious message" to proclaim to earth's billions. We'd be foolish not to recognize that it is a life or death message.