

CHRIST'S WAY OF SOUL-WINNING

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The impression that the unchurched have of Christians has been solidified in their minds over the course of years. Christians hate homosexuals and so does God. They are all going to hell. Is that God's message to the world—one of the condemnation of sinners?

A fellow Adventist carefully cultivated friendship with this cultural group over in Sacramento. One day someone asked her, Will gay people be in heaven? Her response was, If they want to be.

"The last message of mercy to be given to the world is a revelation of God's character of love."¹ Will corporate repentance lead to a "caring church"?

"God is love," and therefore love is power. If the final manifestation of the Holy Spirit will demonstrate to the world that powerful love of God, a new comprehension of it must come first to the church: "It is the darkness of misapprehension of God that is enshrouding the world. Men are losing their knowledge of His character. It has been misunderstood and misinterpreted. At this time a message from God is to be proclaimed, a message illuminating in its influence and saving in its power. His character is to be made known. . . .

"The last ray of merciful light, the last message of mercy to be given to the world, is a revelation of His character of love. The children of God are to manifest His glory. In their own life and character

¹ Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, p. 416.

they are to reveal what the grace of God has done for them."²

Love as *agape* is not a namby-pamby, mushy sentimentalism. The same God who is *agape* is also "a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29). That fire is death to selfishness, sensuality, love of the world, pride and arrogance. It is death to lukewarmness as well. Strange as it may sound to legalistic ears, it is impossible for a church to be weak and sickly if that love is understood and appreciated.

When it does penetrate the church as fire permeates the coal, the church will be what Christ would be to that community were He there in the flesh. Cleansed by the fire of sin-consuming *agape*, the church becomes an extension of Christ's power to redeem lost people.

Then the Holy Spirit will at last do His final work in human hearts. This is because members of the body will receive the "mind of Christ." One's heart beats faster to think about it: "Miracles will be wrought, the sick will be healed, and signs and wonders will follow the believers. . . . The rays of light penetrate everywhere, truth is seen in its clearness, and the honest children of God sever the bands which have held them. . . . A large number take their stand upon the Lord's side."³

What could those "rays of light" be except the love of God seen in His people? Imagine the joy that will flow like a river when the Lord's pure good news goes forth in glory and power! How many human

² Ellen G. White, *Christ's Object Lessons*, pp. 415, 416.

³ *The Great Controversy*, p. 612.

hearts now in darkness will meet Christ and find in Him their soul's longing.

Meanwhile, congregations can too easily give the impression of being a comfortable, exclusive religious club, whereas the Lord declares that His church is "a house of prayer for all nations" (Isa. 56:7). That will include "sinners" we haven't thought much about. The Lord speaks of His true people scattered still in "Babylon" as "My people" (Rev. 18:4). But they may not turn out to be the "nice" people that we hope will join our club. Do we want "bad" people to come out of Babylon and join us?

The Lord does! Why does He send sunlight and rain on "the just and the unjust," even His enemies? The answer: His love is not natural for us to have. If we could manipulate the bounties of nature, wouldn't our discriminating between good and bad people be more efficient in persuading the bad to become good than God's way of showering blessings on both alike?

Many people are counted by the Lord as His, whom now we consider hopeless. There are Mary Magdalenes and thieves on the cross. The moment we try to be selective in our love, we forfeit connection with the Holy Spirit. As the Pharisees and scribes murmured, so we are too easily scandalized because Christ "receives sinners" (Luke 15:1, 2). But the greater the evil of the sinner, the greater is God's glory in redeeming him.

Marvin rode his chopper, drank, and smoked two packs a day. He was at a dance and went up to the bar and ordered a drink. He couldn't order a root beer, because that had sugar in it. He couldn't drink

coke because that had caffeine. So he order a virgin-Scotch on water. As he looked across the room, in walked the most beautiful, tall woman he had ever seen. She sat down beside him and they struck up a conversation.

To make a long story short, she was a Seventh-day Adventist. She shared about Jesus with Marvin. He was baptized and joined the body of Christ. They got married and he is a pastor.

How can we learn this kind of love? There is only one way that will work: by seeing Christ as He truly is. He was perfectly sinless; nevertheless He loved sinners. His repentance "in behalf of the sins of the world" taught Him how weak He was apart from strength from His Father. He knew He could fall. He was born in the same river that sweeps us into sin through the force of its undertow, but He stood firm on the rock of faith in His Father. He perfectly resisted that undertow, even when all appearances told Him that He was forsaken.

The Father sent His Son "in the likeness of sinful flesh." In very truth He is our "brother." He bore the guilt of every sinner. When we learn to look upon Him with such understanding, we will realize a sense of oneness with Him. We will feel toward Him a heart union that will wipe out the appeal of worldly allurements and self-concern.

Zechariah's (12:10; 13:1) prophecy about "the house of David" seeing that they "pierced" Christ is a definite promise of the gift of repentance. Corporate repentance felt for corporate guilt will trigger the reception and exercise of this overflowing love. The ability to feel for and to love

every sinner was the only way that Christ's heavenly *agape* could be true to itself. Its expression was the direct result of his experience in our flesh of corporate repentance. He truly put Himself in the place of "every man," for whom He "tasted death." And He encourages us that we too can learn to love even as He has loved us.

Only a repentance such as this can make sense of the expression, "The Lord our righteousness" (Jer. 23:6). The one who feels that by nature he has at least some righteousness of his own will naturally feel that he is to that extent better than someone else. Feeling so, Christ will be a stranger to him. And so, then, must the sinner likewise be a stranger to Him.

It is natural to human nature to abhor the genuine truth of Christ's righteousness. We resent the contrition implicit in seeing all our righteousness in Christ. We shrink from putting ourselves in the place of the criminal, the prostitute, the rebel, the derelict. We so easily say in heart, "I could never sink to such a depth."

So long as we feel this way, we are powerless to speak as Jesus did an effective word to help. Love for souls is frozen. Restrained and selfishly directed, it ceases to be *agape*. It's bad enough if we decline to enter the kingdom of Heaven ourselves through letting the Holy Spirit melt-down our deep-frozen hearts. But it's worse when we actually shut up the kingdom so that the contemporary Mary Magdalene or thief on the cross cannot get in.

Blessed would be the millstone to be hung around the neck of an unloving saint, and blessed would be his drowning in the sea, said Jesus, rather than face in the judgment the results of a lifelong lovelessness. It is time to understand that the guilt of the whole world's sin, its frustrated enmity against God, its despair, its rebellion—all is "mine" apart from the grace of God. And if Christ were to withdraw from me that grace, I would embody the whole of its evil, for "in me (that is, in my flesh) nothing good dwells" (Rom. 7:18). Until we fully appreciate that truth, we cannot fully realize the imparted righteousness of Christ.

I could never steal billions of dollars of other people's money. Yet what if in making a bank deposit and receiving some cash back you requested a hundred dollars in twenties. She lays them down on the counter. When counted, there were six. And then a naughty little thought comes to mind. She'll never know the difference. You realize that you are a thief.

This is why the repentance Christ asks us to accept takes us back to Calvary. It is impossible to repent truly of minor sins without repenting of the major sin that underlies all other sin. It's the original sin of Adam in the Garden. The murder of the Son of God. This is why there has to be a blotting out of sin as well as a forgiveness of sin.

The heavenly High Priest is not in the business of plucking fruit off bad trees. In this Day of Atonement, He will lay His ax to the root, or He will leave the "tree" alone. A skin-deep conversion that may have been appropriate in past ages won't do

now. The underlying idea behind the message of Christ's righteousness is that I possess not a shred of righteousness of my own, and only when I see that I can discern the gift of His.

"According to your faith be it unto you," is the measure of our receptivity. By true repentance, we accept the gift of contrition and forgiveness for all sin of which we are potentially capable, not merely for the few sins which we think we have personally committed. Thus Christ can now impute and impart potential righteousness equal to His own perfection, far beyond our capacity. But it abounds much more than the potential guilt we can realize in behalf of the sins of the world.

Partaking of the divine nature of the Lord Himself the penitent "delights in mercy". He discovers his greatest pleasure in finding apparently hopeless material and helping these people become subjects of God's grace.

I have witnessed a couple of colleagues fall into sin and lose their ministry. That sin they fell into is my sin, but for the grace of God. They are my responsibility. Is there something I could say or some word of encouragement that could have helped in time of need?

When one member in a congregation falls into sin, a little reflection can convince many members that they share in her guilt. Had we been more alert, more kindhearted, more ready to speak "a word in season to him who is weary," more effective in communicating the pure, powerful truth of the gospel, we might have saved the erring member from falling.

It is encouraging to believe that within this generation a large sense of loving concern can be realized on a worldwide scale. There will be a heart-unity and concern between races, nationalities, and social and economic cultures seldom seen as yet. Disparate theological groups within the church will humble themselves at the feet of Jesus. The fulfillment of Christ's ideal will be on all levels. The winter of frozen inhibitions and fears will give way to a glorious spring where the loves and sympathies that God has implanted in our souls will find more true and pure expression to one another.

It will be impossible any longer to feel superior or patronizing toward people whose race, nationality, culture, or theology, is different from ours. With "the mind of Christ," a bond of sympathy and fellowship is established "in Him." This miracle will follow the laws of grace.

Instead of limiting itself to a shared repentance in behalf of our contemporary generation of the living, it will take past generations as well. Paul's idea, "As the body is one, and has many members, . . . so also is Christ," will be seen to include the past body of Christ also. Thus Moses' command to repent for the sins of previous generations will make sense: "If they shall confess their iniquity, and the iniquity of their *fathers*, with their trespass which they trespassed against me, and that also they have walked contrary unto me" (Lev. 26:40). The "final atonement" becomes a reality, and the pre-Advent judgment can then be concluded.

In 1996 the Evangelical Lutheran Church reviewing its history expressed repentance: "The

Nazis used many of Luther's teachings during the Holocaust to justify their genocidal war against the Jews. . . . 'We express our deep and abiding sorrow over its tragic effects on subsequent generations.'

More than 25,000 Turks have signed a statement apologizing for war crimes committed by the Ottoman Empire during World War I. More than a million Armenians lost their lives in the catastrophic events, which began in 1915. Is this the beginning of a critical examination of the past? The Turks who are now apologizing are not responsible for the sins of 1915. There is no collective crime, but there is a collective conscience.

Ella Rydzewski, a thoughtful SDA writer: "Some day one group will make *agape* love part of a committed lifestyle. Corporate love will be a fundamental belief, and they will be the remnant people. Where remnant people prevail, Bosnias and Rwandas cannot happen." This was written after the horrendous 1995 massacres in Rwanda where some Rwandan SDA leaders participated.

While there will be a shaking, and some, perhaps many, who refuse the blessing will abandon church fellowship, the inspired word implies that a true remnant of believers in Christ will remain. The shaking of the tree or branches is not all bad news. It offers the good news that "gleaning grapes will be left in it" (cp. Is. 17:6; 24:13). Those who are left "shall lift up their voice, they shall sing. . . for the majesty of the Lord" (vs. 14). Those who are shaken out will only make "manifest, that none of them were of us" (1 John 2:19). God's work will go forward unhindered and greatly strengthened.

In this time of unprecedented upheaval, the church will be united and coordinated like a healthy human body that has been healed. Backbiting, evil-surmising, gossip, even forgetfulness of the needs of others, will be overcome. The listening ear tuned to be sensitive to the call of the Holy Spirit will hear and act upon the conviction of duty.

When He says as He said to Philip, "Go near, and join yourself to this chariot," the obedient response will be immediate; and a soul will be won as the deacon won the Ethiopian official from Candace's royal court. At last the "Head" will find a perfectly responsive "body" with which to dwell; and rejoicing over His people with singing, the Lord will gladly bring into their church fellowship all His people now scattered in Babylon. The moment they step in the door, these honest-hearted ones will sense the presence of the heart-melting *agape* of Christ which is a "consuming fire" to sin. Oh, the joys that contrition will make possible!

Miracles of heart-healing will come as if Christ Himself were present in the flesh. Chasms of estrangement will be bridged. Marital dissensions will find solutions that have evaded the best efforts of counselors and psychiatrists. Broken homes will be cemented in the bonds of love that elicits ultimate contrition from believing hearts. Harps now silent will ring with melody when the strings are touched by this hand.

Bewildered and frustrated youth will see a revelation of Christ never before discerned. Satan's enchantment of music, entertainment, immorality, and rebellion will lose its hold, and the pure, joyous

tide of youthful devotion to Christ will flow to the praise of His grace. “The Lord will arise over you, and His glory will be seen upon you. The Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising” (Is. 60:2, 3).

Marvelous will be the results when the church learns to feel for the world as Christ feels for it. The Head cannot say to the feet, “I have no need of you” (1 Cor. 12:21). This is why “God has set . . . in the church” the various gifts of His Spirit. The church becomes His efficient “body” in expressing Himself to the world in the same way that a healthy person expresses through his physical members the thoughts and intent of his mind. All gifts will lead to the “more excellent way,” which is *agape*.

The world and the vast universe beyond will watch with wonder. The final demonstration of the fruits of Christ’s sacrifice will bring the great controversy to a triumphant close. In a profound sense hardly dreamed of by the pioneers, a work will be done in the hearts of God’s people that is a parallel to and consistent with the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary in Heaven. Thus it will be “cleansed,” justified, set right before the universe.

Such an experience will transform the church into a dynamo of love. It is God’s plan that no church will have seating capacity for the converted sinners who will want to stream into it. Corporate and denominational repentance is the whole church experiencing Christ-like love and empathy for all for whom He died. Of course, not all in the world will respond. In fact, many will reject its final

proclamation. But many more than we have thought will gladly respond.

Let us beware of the sinful unbelief that doubts how good the good news is. Those who say, “It’s too good to be true!” should consider a lesson hidden in Scripture. In the days of Elisha, Samaria suffered a terrible famine through a siege by the Syrian army:

“As a result of the siege the food shortage in the city was so severe that a donkey’s head cost eighty pieces of silver, and half a pound of dove’s dung cost five pieces of silver. . . . The king. . . exclaimed, ‘May God strike me dead if Elisha is not beheaded before the day is over!’

“Elisha answered, . . . ‘By this time tomorrow you will be able to buy. . . ten pounds of the best wheat or twenty pounds of barley for one piece of silver.’

“The personal attendant of the king said to Elisha, ‘That can’t happen—not even if the Lord himself were to send grain at once!’

“‘You will see it happen, but you won’t get to eat any of the food,’ Elisha replied” (2 Kings 6:25-7:20, TEV).

We have all been nurtured in a common unbelief that makes it easy for us to sympathize with the “king’s attendant.” How could such frightful famine be relieved by such incredible plenty in a mere 24 hours? Elisha’s message was the contemporary spirit of prophecy, and the highly placed officer simply did not believe the gift.

The Lord frightened away the invading Syrians and they left their huge supplies for the starving Israelites:

“It so happened that the king of Israel had put the city gate under the command of the officer who was his personal attendant. The officer was trampled to death there by the people and died, as Elisha had predicted. . . . That is just what happened to him—he died, trampled to death by the people at the city gate” (vss. 17, 20).

Unbelief in this “time of the latter rain” will shut us out from taking part in the glorious experience that the Lord foretells for His people. Inspired statements confirm the vision of the “whole church” within history fully experiencing such blessing, doubtless following its purification:

“The Holy Spirit is to animate and pervade the whole church, purifying and cementing hearts.”⁴

A disheveled man apparently walked in off the street right in the middle of the pastor’s sermon. The visitor started looking for an empty seat in the back, but failing to find one, he walked slowly down the aisle searching. And not finding any, he kept on going to the front of the sanctuary. By this time the stranger had produced a lot of commotion among the worshipers. Not finding a seat when he reached the front and not seeing anyone offering him any, he simply squatted down right there in the aisle in front of the entire stunned congregation.

As he sat there listening to the rest of the sermon, an old deacon approached the strange and unexpected visitor. “What will the deacon do?” the people wondered. “Will he usher him out, or will he. . . ?” To the amazement of everyone present, the

old deacon touched his shoulder and squatted down right next to him!

Here is where we take off our shoes for we tread solemnly on holy ground. Let us pray that the Spirit of God may employ many voices to echo the call. The Head depends on us as members of His “body” to express His will. Let no humble person underestimate the importance of her response. Perhaps all the Lord needs is to find one person somewhere who is baptized and crucified and risen “with Christ” and who thus shares His experience of repentance. Then the precious leaven of truth can permeate the whole body.

⁴ *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 9, p. 20.