

GOD'S SEAL OF APPROVAL¹

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Were Christians involved in the Holocaust? There are stories of heroic efforts by some Christians to rescue or to hide Jews who were being pursued by the ruthless Nazis who wanted to kill them. But the sad truth is that in many cases Christian churches or organizations were strangely silent. Hitler himself was the son of Christian parents and a choirboy in his youth. Churches, both Catholic and Protestant, were strangely silent in protesting publicly against what the Nazis were doing.

Most Christians in Germany were very vocal in their shouting "Hiel Hitler!" and keeping in step with the crowds. It was not easy to swim against the Nazi current in the stream. In reading about the horror that was Nazism one wonders what they would have done had they been in Germany at that time. Would you have had the courage to stand all alone for what I knew was right? At the cost of imprisonment, ridicule, torture, death?

God tells us in Ex 23:2, "Thou shalt not follow a multitude to do evil." The GNB says, "Do not follow the majority when they do wrong or when they give testimony that perverts justice." It's easy to obey that commandment when we live in a society that respects minority opinions being expressed; but what would you do in a society that condemns minority views? Ridicules you? Puts you down?

We see a vivid glimpse of ourselves in the experience of Peter: afraid of the crowd, so he denies Jesus. How many "Peters" were there in Nazi Germany who were afraid to stand alone and face persecution with the Jews? How many "Peters" are there among us who will someday go along with the crowd and support the mark of the beast when it is popular to do so? If you feel like I do, you will want to get on your knees and plead, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" and plead with Him, "Please Lord, save me from myself!"

In the book of Revelation, we read that we must come face to face with the final issue of the seal of God or the mark of the beast (Rev. 13:11-18; 14:8; 15:1-3, etc.). So terrible will be the ultimate breakdown of societal norms due to widespread abandonment of the law of God, that the people will demand that government make laws enforcing a popular form of religion that tramples on the God-given rights of minorities. The enforcement of a national Sunday law will herald desperate attempts to halt society's slide into moral suicide.

But a phenomenal development has taken place: significant numbers of seventh-day Sabbath observers [the Worldwide Church of God and some Seventh-day Adventists] have turned militantly against the observance of the Sabbath. Pastors who once taught observance of the Sabbath have joined with the Pope in "new covenant" arguments against it. History records no similar movement in the past 2000 years!

Their basic argument against the Sabbath is their understanding of the New Covenant which, appeals

¹ Revelation 7:2-3. 388, 383.

to people weary of legalism. Their arguments are subtle, calculated to overthrow the Sabbath faith of anyone who does not understand the Bible teaching of the two covenants. In other words, the phenomenon we now face is coercive pressure to overthrow the seventh-day Sabbath with distortions of Bible teaching on the two covenants, *before* the final test of civil legislation in the mark of the beast! One entire church that formerly observed the seventh-day Sabbath has now turned against it, embracing the pope's arguments (the World Church of God). The movement is like an avalanche that sweeps everything before it, unless one is rooted and grounded in the truth of the two covenants.

How can one understand the way God so often threatens His people of old? Why that seemingly endless conflict? Why the almost constant unpleasant tension between Him and His people? Actually, you don't see it until you come to Exodus 19.

In Genesis there's a pleasant relationship between God and His people, for example, God making those fantastic promises of "blessings" galore to Abraham and his descendants, and His tender dealings with Isaac and Jacob. He writes His holy law on their hearts.

Then suddenly, a change: He must write it on tables of stone amid thunder, lightning, trumpet blowing, earthquakes, and a fearful death boundary around Mount Sinai. And almost from then on, rebellious, backsliding people slipping back into pagan worldliness right up into Malachi, until finally we get to Matthew where they crucify their Lord of

glory. What happened in Exodus 19? The people themselves formed the old covenant (vss. 4-8), with their promise "all that the Lord hath spoken we will do;" whereas Abraham had believed the new covenant. Abraham "believed in the Lord, and He counted it to him for righteousness" (Gen. 15:6). The new one is the one-sided promise of God; the old is the "faulty" promise of the people. That's why a major portion of the Bible is the "Old Testament" (or covenant), leading us back to where Abraham was—to be "justified by faith" under the new covenant (Gal. 3:24).

How can one stand firm in the mark of the beast issue? The truth is simple and clear: (a) God's covenants are never contracts, they are one-sided promises on His part, backed by His solemn oath (Gen. 15:5-18). (b) He promises to write His ten commandments on the heart, "causing" His people to walk in the path of obedience (Eze. 36:25-27); that is the New Covenant. The ten commandments become God's ten promises of liberty (Ps. 119:45)! (c) The unbelieving people instituted the Old Covenant by their vain promise to obey (Ex. 19:8). (d) The faith of Abraham is the proper response to God's promises (Gal. 3:6, 7). (e) "Faith" is a heart-melting appreciation of the sacrifice of the Lamb of God (Rom. 10:10). (f) It motivates to complete obedience (2 Cor. 5:14, 15).

The shape of things to come is becoming more sharply focused day by day. Two world movements are aligning themselves for the last great conflict: the "beast" of Revelation 13, versus the third angel's message of Revelation 14:6-12. Those who

accept the latter will worship the Lamb, the Christ of the cross who by His sacrifice “tasted death for every man.”

And those who worship the beast and his image will worship self. The self-righteousness of the old covenant will be the worship of the beast, and the imputed and imparted righteousness of Christ will be the worship of the Lamb. One will be faith in the promises of God, the other will be the “righteousness” of human promises. One will appreciate the breadth, depth, length and height of “the *agape* of Christ which passeth knowledge” (Eph. 3:14-21), and the other will become a false view of the cross, a counterfeit misrepresentation of the gospel which will be the worship of a false “christ.”

And so clever will the deceptions be that “if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect” (Matt. 24:24). We are told by an inspired prediction that in that final hour “a great proportion” of those who “now appear to be genuine” will “betray sacred trusts,” and take their side with the avowed enemies of the truth. “When the law of God is made void, and the church is sifted by the fiery trials that are to try all that live upon the earth, a great proportion of those who are supposed to be genuine will give heed to seducing spirits, and will turn traitors and betray sacred trusts. They will prove our very worst persecutors. ‘Of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them;’ and many will give heed to seducing spirits.

“Those who apostatize in time of trial will bear false witness and betray their brethren, to secure their own safety. They will tell where their brethren are concealed, putting the wolves on their track. Christ has warned us of this, that we may not be surprised at the cruel, unnatural course pursued by friends and relatives.”²

If this present generation is the last before the second coming of the true Christ, the Holy Spirit must be calling us to sober thinking. Is it really possible that old covenant thinking can lead at last to final apostasy? Well, the answer is that it certainly did so for ancient Israel. It led them to crucify their true Messiah.

Could anything be more important than for us to learn now what it means to “worship the Lamb”? To “glory” in nothing “save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Gal. 6:14)? How to “survey that wondrous cross, on which the Prince of glory died . . .”? To appreciate what it cost Him to save us? Humble, contrite hearts will worship the Lamb; proud, self-satisfied ones (“rich and increased with goods”)—the beast and his image.

There is a very sober warning in the Bible that it seems it is easy for us to forget. It’s in Rev. 14:9-12. “If any person worship the beast and his image, and receive his mark in his right hand or in his forehead, the same shall drink of the wine of the wrath of God . . .” Then chapter 15 goes on to speak of those who have met this great challenge and have accepted that third angel’s message, and have

² Ellen G. White, *Maranatha*, p. 197.

“gotten the victory over the beast, and over his image, and over his mark, and over the number of his name” who stand on the sea of glass singing the song of the Lamb forever and ever.

In fact, the entire Book of Revelation is concerned about this issue—the mark of the beast. Chapter 7 describes that same group who sing the song of the Lamb as those who have received the seal of God, who have washed their robes and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. “Saying, Hurt not the earth, neither the sea, nor the trees, till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads. And I heard the number of them which were sealed: and there were sealed an hundred and forty and four thousand of all the tribes of the children of Israel” (Rev. 7:3, 4).

In the Bible, a “seal” is interchangeable with a “mark.” So the Book of Revelation tells us that in the last days just prior to Jesus’ return in the clouds of heaven, the entire population of the earth will be divided into two groups: those who receive that “seal of God” and those who accept that “mark of the beast.” Pretty serious, isn’t it?

Revelation 13:8 says that “all that dwell upon the earth” will worship the beast with the sole exception of those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life. It’s another crisis which in principle is the same that the people faced when Jesus was here on earth. They were divided into two groups—those who believed He was the true Messiah as He claimed, and those who rejected Him. He asked them, “What think ye of Christ?” (Matt. 22:42). They *had* to decide!

And so today, you and I *have* to decide between the mark of the beast and the seal of God. But the issue is far, far deeper than a superficial, skin-deep outward sign. “The third angel’s message in verity” is the true message of righteousness by faith; it will lead to receiving the seal of God. A false, legalistic view will lead to the mark of the beast. It’s time for serious study!

Is it possible that sinners (like all of us are born to be!) can overcome sin and become truly Christ-like in character? Can “the righteousness of the law” (perfect obedience, perfect loyalty) ever be achieved in this life?

The Bible quite clearly says: “all have sinned, and continue [present tense] to come short” (Rom. 3:23). Our very nature is sinful; and even “saints” can’t help showing that they are sinners. Nobody is perfect. So is perfection of character an impossible dream?

The Bible insists on a Good News answer—Yes! God sent His beloved Son into the world on the special mission to “save His people *from* their sins,” not *in* them (Matt. 1:21). Rom. 8:3, 4 says that He was “sent . . . to condemn sin in the flesh, that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us.”

The word “righteousness” used there means the righteous character of those who “walk after the Spirit.” (It’s *dikaionomata*, the imparted righteousness of saints, Rev. 19:8, whereas *dikaionomata* always is the imputed righteousness of Christ). Heb. 13:21 says that the Saviour will “make you perfect in every good work to do His will.” And Rev. 14:1-5 describes a people at the close of time who “are

without fault before the throne of God,” who “follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth.” Not part way, but totally. They will refuse “the mark of the beast” and will receive “the seal of God” (Rev. 13:16, 17; 7:1-4).

Are they fanatics? Extremists? Strait-laced grumpy “saints”? No way! Jesus got in on the perfection debate Himself on the Good News side. He said: “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect” (Matt. 5:48). In saying so, He gives us the key to unlock the perplexity. His context is learning to love like the Father loves, who sends His rain and sunshine on the just and on the unjust, who loves bad people, even His enemies.

Jesus’ idea of “perfection” is simple: learning to love like that! John learned the idea from Him, for he also says that if you’ve learned to love like that, you “know God,” you’re “born of God,” He “dwells in” you, you have “His Spirit,” and you yourself “dwell in God.”

Furthermore, you overcome fear (which goes along with sin), and you end up “perfect” (see 1 John 4:7-18). True, you and I were born totally bereft of such love (*agape*); but there’s a filling station where the Holy Spirit “sheds it abroad in our hearts” (Rom. 5:5). Or to change the metaphor, it’s the simple matter of going to school to learn it, “the school of Christ.” The “best,” proudest person must matriculate through the kindergarten.

There was an Augsburg “accord”: Roman Catholic and Lutheran congregations worshipping together, pastors exchanging pulpits, “we all agree,” “let’s be one.”

But Revelation 14 paints a prophetic picture of very sharp “Christian” controversy in the last days just before the second coming of Christ. The angel from heaven proclaims “the everlasting gospel” (vs. 6), which of course is justification by faith. In contrast, “Babylon is fallen” (vs. 8), and spiritual warfare between those who favor “the mark of the beast” and the “saints” who “keep the commandments of God and the faith of the Jesus” (vs. 9-12).

The “beast” is a religious power who counterfeits the gospel (Rev. 13:5-8), the grand deception of the last days (Matt. 24:23, 24). (And “let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall,” 1 Cor. 10:12). Paul says there are two gospels: one is “the truth of the gospel” and the other is “another gospel, which is not another,” but is an exceedingly clever counterfeit (Gal. 2:5; 1:6, 7).

The counterfeit “sits in the temple of God” (2 Thess. 2:3, 4), thus deceiving multitudes (Rev. 13:8). Very earnestly Jesus pleads with us, “Take heed lest any man deceive you” (Mark 13:5). The worst fate that could possibly befall you would be for Jesus to come the second time and catch you in the act of supporting the counterfeit! A clever enemy is bent on one purpose: “if possible deceiving the very elect” (Matt. 24:24).

What’s the difference between “the truth of the gospel” kind of justification by faith and the clever counterfeit?

Careful study brings one to the conclusion that the ultimate issue will be the message of justification by faith, because the three “angels” that proclaim the

final message will be presenting “the everlasting gospel” (Rev. 14:6, 7; the second and “third” follow the first). That being so, the underlying issue in this great conflict between the seal of God and the mark of the beast must be the Good News of salvation by grace through faith—the best Good News anyone can hear.

Amazingly, the great Enemy of righteousness will so confuse and deceive the world that multitudes will accept a counterfeit “righteousness by faith” so cleverly devised that “if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect” (Matt. 24:24). It will be necessary to distinguish between “the sign of the cross” and the reality of the cross. A correct understanding of “the truth of the gospel” means a true heart-appreciation of what the Son of God accomplished by His sacrifice.

Then the bottom line finally emerges: it’s a sin to be deceived! In fact, in the final scene of the great drama, the believing of the deception of the mark of the beast will constitute the unpardonable sin which will call for ultimate judgment (see Rev. 14:9-11).

Wow! This looks like serious business! Understanding the gospel of justification by faith is “better than rubies; and all the things that may be desired are not to be compared to it. . . . yea, [it is] durable riches and righteousness” (Prov. 8:11, 18).

There are many differences, but look at the results of believing either one or the other: the genuine experience of justification by faith makes the believer obedient to all “the commandments of God” (Rev. 14:6, 12). It reconciles the heart to His righteousness, which is total obedience to His holy

law, a crucifixion of self “with Christ” (Gal. 2:20). In contrast, the counterfeit justification by faith cleverly appears to be genuine by approving of obedience to nine of the ten commandments but insists on disobedience to one that in effect nullifies them all (see James 2:10-12), and thus leaves the so-called “believer” ignorantly devoted to the worship of self. It is modern Baal-worship, which is worship of self disguised to look like worship of Christ—in principle the nemesis of ancient Israel.

The last message that the God of heaven sends to this dark world is the three-fold message in Revelation 14 and then amplified further in chapter 18 when the message swells to a loud cry and the entire earth is to be lightened with its glory. Much as we all dislike controversy and tension, this three-fold message will arouse the most intense opposition of any in history, resulting in a polarization of humanity into two opposing groups: those who truly keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus, and those who will constitute a “Babylon” in rebellion against God by accepting and enforcing what is called “the mark of the beast.”

This crisis will be brought about deliberately by the work of the Holy Spirit, and no one will be able to stop it happening. And the three-fold message will not be a triumphalist call to legalism but a revelation of what Christ accomplished for humanity by His sacrifice. This is evident by the fact that some 25 times He is portrayed in Revelation as “the Lamb,” and the final “harvest” will be a people “who follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth” (Rev. 14:4).

He is revealed in Revelation as “a Lamb as it had been slain . . . from the foundation of the world” (Rev. 5:6; 13:8). The call to “worship Him” results in a vast throng who sing from the depths of their hearts, “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain, . . . Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto Him who sits upon the throne, and unto the Lamb for ever” (Rev. 5:12, 13). No one will ever sing such a song unless his/her heart has been humbled into the dust by a realization of what it cost that Lamb of God to save us, who “has redeemed us to God by [His] blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation” (5:9; cf. 14:6, 7).

Clearly, the message that is to lighten the earth with glory will be about Christ and Him crucified, about “His blood.” “When I survey the wondrous cross, . . . I pour contempt on all my pride.” That’s the essence of the third angel’s message.

HOW GOD WILL BE JUDGED

There is the question of how God will be judged by the universe. Or is “judgment” all one-sided with Him arbitrarily judging us? This is a serious issue because a mistaken idea here can influence a person’s spiritual experience and motivate him/her to serve “God” because of fear. If such craven fear becomes the deepest motivation of our hearts, then our “Christianity” degenerates to become little better than paganism. Someone may ask, What difference does it make, whether “obedience” is motivated by fear or by love so long as it “obeys the law”? The difference will show up in the final test of the “mark of the beast.” All fear-motivation will then program us to accept the mark of the beast rather than the

seal of God because the mark of the beast (Rev. 13:13-18; 16:2) will be based entirely on fear (the ultimate root of paganism). We *must* find a better motivation. And that will require a clearer understanding of the character of God.

He does not want anyone to serve Him because of fear, because such fear would be for Him a hollow victory. Billions of people bowing low before Him because they are afraid of Him and His retributive judgment would bring Him no joy. He wants deep sincerity. Therefore Christ as the Son of God must humble Himself, make Himself vulnerable, become open and transparent, surrender Himself to the judgment of His creatures,—in short, die upon a cross apparently forsaken by God, suffer the pangs of hell itself, drain the last drop of fear in order to disarm and condemn it forever.

According to Revelation 14:6-15, God must submit Himself to the judgment of the universe, “for the hour of His judgment is come.” Only thus can Satan, sin, and fear be finally and totally conquered, “because fear hath torment.” The universe at last will see that “God is *agape*,” and “*agape* casteth out fear” (1 John 4:8, 18). You and I can overcome it only by permitting the Holy Spirit to “shed abroad in our hearts” this “*agape* of God” (Rom. 5:5). Each must ask himself, Am I pagan or Christian?

The Book of Revelation says the world will hear the last gospel call of mercy in the “loud cry” of the fourth angel’s message. Those who hear will coalesce into two groups only: (1) those who gladly accept the seal of God and prepare for translation, and (2) those who refuse reconciliation with Christ

and receive the mark of the beast. They take it in their foreheads (mentally convinced that the beast is right) or in their hands (knowing better but fearfully going along with the crowd).

Discerning the true significance of the Sabbath truth as something far deeper than many suppose, Ellen White said that justification by faith will become the all-powerful motivation: “One interest will prevail, one subject will swallow up every other,—CHRIST OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS.”³

According to her, that powerful proclamation of justification by faith is “the third angel’s message in verity.” Reinforcing the prophetic picture in Revelation 13-19, she says that apostate Protestantism will join hands with Roman Catholicism, abandoning the faith of the Protestant Reformers. The result: a conflict that will be fierce. Specious arguments will fly thick and fast, and subtle counterfeits of conversion and godliness will be so clever “that, if it were possible, they shall deceive the very elect” (Matt. 24:24).

Onto this last-days stage steps the 1888 message of justification by faith—a view distinctly different than what either Roman Catholics or Evangelical Protestants believe. The Lord entrusted it to Seventh-day Adventists for two reasons: (1) to deliver them forever from the “cult” charge of being legalists, and (2) to enable them to lighten the earth with their message so efficiently that every honest soul in Babylon would “hear” and respond. The great gospel commission was to have been finished

³ *Review and Herald Extra*, Dec. 23, 1890.

in that one generation. Do we want to wait for a future generation to experience that blessing? Shouldn’t we try to understand these issues now?

What does Roman Catholicism teach? Simply put: justification by faith and by works. Ellen White was probably the first to recognize in 1890 how easily Seventh-day Adventists can slide into the Catholic position. “Here is an opportunity for falsehood to be accepted as truth. If any man can merit salvation by anything he may do, then he is in the same position as the Catholic to do penance for his sins. Salvation then, is partly of debt, that may be earned as wages.”⁴

In 1893 another speaker delved deeper into the problem: “Since the Minneapolis meeting . . . some of those who stood so openly against that [message] at that time, and voted with uplifted hand against it . . . I have heard say ‘amen’ to statements that were as openly and decidedly papal as the papal church itself can state . . . her doctrine of justification by faith. . . . ‘Why,’ says one, ‘I didn’t know that the Catholic church believes in justification by faith.’ . . . ‘I thought they believed in justification by works.’ They do and they do not believe in anything else; but they pass it off under the head of justification by faith. And they are not the only people in the world that are doing it . . .”⁵

He touched a raw Adventist nerve when he continued: “I have here a book entitled, ‘Catholic Belief.’ . . . I want you to see what the Roman Catholic idea of justification by faith is, because I

⁴ *Faith and Works*, p. 20.

⁵ A. T. Jones, *General Conference Bulletin*, 1893, p. 244.

have had to meet it among professed Seventh-day Adventists the past four years. . . . On page 74 of this work I read as follows: . . . ‘A man can dispose himself only by the help of divine grace, and the dispositions which he shows do not by any means affect or merit justification: *they only serve to prepare him for it.*’”

Then he zeroed in: “No, I don’t believe in justification by works; but we have got to do something in order to be prepared for it. We have got to show our good intentions any way. We have got to make some good resolutions before we start, any way; something to prepare us for it.” Jones then quoted from the same Catholic book which attacks Protestantism (p. 366): “They [Protestants] have framed a new Dogma, not to be found in any of the creeds, or in the Canons of any General Council; I mean, the new dogma of Justification by Faith alone, or by Faith alone.”⁶

Then Jones asked the pointed question: “Shall we be Protestants, or Catholics? . . . Shall we proclaim the third angel’s message against the worship of the beast and his image? or shall we be a part of the beast and his image ourselves?” (pp. 262-264).

What does the Catholic Church teach today? “If anyone says that the sinner is justified by faith alone, meaning, that nothing else is required to cooperate in order to obtain the grace of justification, let him be anathema” (Council of Trent, Canon 9). “If anyone says that a man who is

⁶ Joseph Faa di Bruno, *Catholic Belief: Or, a Short and Simple Exposition of Catholic Doctrine* (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1884), p. 319.

justified and however perfect is not bound to observe the commandments of God and the Church, but only to believe, as if the Gospel were a bare and absolute promise of eternal life without the condition of observing the commandments, let him be anathema” (Canon 20). “If anyone says that justifying faith is nothing more than confidence in divine mercy, which remits sins for Christ’s sake, or that it is this confidence alone that justifies us, let him be anathema” (Canon 12). “If anyone says that the good works of the one justified . . . are not also the good merits of him justified; or that the one justified . . . does not truly merit an increase of grace, eternal life, . . . let him be anathema” (Canon 32). “We can merit for ourselves and for others all the graces needed to attain eternal life.”⁷

What do Evangelical, Reformationist Protestants believe? While opposing Romanism, they still have legalism embedded in their understanding because they see merit in the sinner’s “accepting” Christ. They understand that when a sinner believes the gospel, he is then legally justified. His faith becomes an “act” which initiates his justification. The sinner has done something that gets the process of salvation going for him. But such justification only legally clears him of past sins, and is not in itself a change of heart—the change of heart comes in sanctification (which they believe is

⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Liguori, Mo: Liguori Publications, 1994, pp. 489, 490). Pope John Paul II says “a good life is the condition of salvation.” *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), p. 194.

never complete in this life). Therefore justification by faith covers continued sinning. In fact, due to not understanding the full message of Christ's righteousness, they see it as impossible not to continue sinning so long as we are in mortal flesh with a sinful nature. Different Protestant leaders may use different terminology, but this is the generally held, basic idea.

What is the message of justification by faith which "the Lord in His great mercy sent" to Seventh-day Adventists? The sinner's faith is not what initiates his justification. *God initiated it in the sacrifice of His Son.* He "restored the whole race of men to favor with God," "in Christ." He has made all men "accepted in the Beloved." As surely as a verdict of condemnation came upon all men "in Adam," so a verdict of acquittal came on all men "in Christ." Since the legal justification took place by the sacrifice of Christ as our second Adam, justification by faith therefore has to be far more than a legal declaration: it actually reconciles the believer's heart to God; and he cannot be reconciled to God and not at the same time be reconciled to His holy law. *Therefore genuine justification by faith in this antitypical Day of Atonement makes the believer obedient to all the commandments of God and prepares him for translation.* We are saved by Christ, by grace, through faith, not of works (Eph. 2:8, 9). Thus instead of being motivated by either fear of hell or hope of reward, the believer is motivated by the love of Christ to live not unto self, but unto Him.

In this light, justification by faith is the only cure for our world-wide spiritual disease of luke-warmness, the only means to prepare a people for the coming of Christ.