

# **CORPORATE REPENTANCE**

## **Plea of the TRUE Witness**

Robert J. Wieland

### **THE GREATEST PROBLEM GOD HAS HAD IN 6000 YEARS**

- ❖ **Good people don't go to heaven as soon as they die.**
- ❖ **They wait in the grave for a corporate first resurrection. Not even a perfect person will go to heaven on his or her own.**
- ❖ **But the first resurrection requires that Jesus Himself come a second time. (Nobody else can rise anyone.)**
- ❖ **But He can't, until His living people are ready. "Our God is a consuming fire" to sin (Hebrews 12:29). If He were to come while there is even unknown sin in our hearts, we would be "consumed." He loves us too much to do that to us.**

### **HOW CAN HIS IMPASSE BE SOLVED?**

- ❖ **Band-aids won't work—not any longer. Revelation 3 says the main problem is deep—it lies with the "angel" of the church, its leadership.**
- ❖ **The topic discussed in this book is arousing deep interest worldwide and is electrifying the church.**

The author has served the church for 63 years as pastor, missionary, administrator, and publishing house editor.

He holds current, honorary ministerial credentials from the Pacific Union Conference of Seventh-day Adventists.

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## Contents

Let's Begin With a Postscript .....	2
Foreword .....	5
Introduction .....	5
Chapter 1 – A FAX Direct From Heaven .....	6
Chapter 2 – Not a Word of Praise from Jesus! .....	9
Chapter 3 – The Fundamental Truth: Christ's Church as His Corporate body .....	16
Chapter 4 – The Disappointed Christ .....	20
Chapter 5 – The Lord's Most Serious Problem of the Ages .....	24
Chapter 6 – A First in Human History: A Day-of-Atonement Repentance .....	28
Chapter 7 – Christ's Repentance for Sins He Never Committed .....	35
Chapter 8 – How Christ Called the Ancient Jews to National Repentance .....	40
Chapter 9 – How the Ancient Jewish Nation Sealed Their Doom .....	44
Chapter 10 – The Urgency of Christ's Call to Repent .....	47
Chapter 11 – The Practical Problem: How Can a Church of Millions of Memb. Repent? .....	55
Chapter 12 – What Our Denominational History Tells Us .....	58
Chapter 13 – Corporate Repentance: Path to Christlike Love .....	65
Appendix A – A Repentance of Ministers and Their Families .....	71
Appendix B – Laodicea Is Not Doomed .....	72
Appendix C – Ezekiel 18 and Corporate Guilt .....	74

### *Let's Begin With a Postscript*

Since this book was originally printed (1992), a phenomenal development of apparent "corporate repentance" has arisen among numerous Christian organizations, including the Roman Catholic Church. We assume of course that they know nothing about this unpretentious volume, for it has never been "published" where they could know about it. But the following brief survey, mostly post-1992, indicates what seems almost a sympathetic response to the thesis of this book:

- 1992: "In Africa in 1992, [the pope] apologized for the [Catholic] church's complicity in the African slave trade" (*U.S. News and World Report*).
- 1995: "The leader of 950 million Catholics worldwide set the tone in 1992 by formally acknowledging that 17th century church judges erred when they condemned Italian astronomer Galileo for saying the earth revolved about the sun. On other trips in 1992, John Paul apologized in Africa for church complicity in the slave trade and lamented in Latin America the Catholic exploitation of Native Americans" (*The Los Angeles Times*).
- 1994: Regal Books published John Dawson's *Healing America's Wounds* in which he pleads with "us" to recognize wrongs white Americans have done in the past, including the enslaving of Blacks and atrocities to Native Americans. At an ensuing reconciliation conference in Atlanta "a woman whose ancestors owned slaves knelt and took the hands of the great-grandson of a slave, repeating this prayer: 'In the name of Jesus, I ask forgiveness for the sin of slavery, for buying human beings like animals, for saying they had no soul, for raping the women, for separating families, for tearing arms off of fathers who were trying to hold their children, for beating them bloody'" (yet this particular individual had never done any of those things personally!).

- 1995: "President Jacques Chirac acknowledged Sunday what a generation of political leaders did not—that France was an accomplice in deporting thousands of Jews to Nazi death camps during the German occupation of World War II. 'These dark hours forever sully our history and are an insult to our past and our traditions— The criminal folly of the occupiers was seconded by the French, by the French state.'... Chirac ... made a distinction between Vichy and the rest of the nation, which he called 'upright, generous, faithful to its traditions, its genius'" (*The Sacramento Bee*).

- 1995: "Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi . . . humbly accepted the historical fact that the Japanese colonial rule inflicted unbearable damage and pain on Korean people and expressed remorseful repentance and heartfelt apology for the ordeal" (*The New York Times*).

- 1995: "Last week, the nation's largest Protestant body, the Southern Baptist Convention, prayed for healing as it confessed to a sin of historic proportion. 'We lament, repudiate, historic acts of evil such as slavery from which we continue to reap a bitter harvest'" (*U. S News and World Report*, under the title of "The Era of Collective Repentance").

- 1996: "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'" (The Evangelical Lutheran Church, *The Sacramento Bee*).

- 1997: "Britain apologizes to Ireland 150 years later . . . for contributing to Ireland's potato famine ... a massive human tragedy... that still causes pain as we reflect on it today" (Tony Blair, *California News Services*).

- 1998: "Under the ailing Pope John Paul II, the Vatican is engaged on a grand purification to settle its debts to history before the third millennium" (Christian Tyler in *The Financial Times*).

- 1998: "In a papal bull titled 'Incarnationis Mysterium'... John Paul II asked Catholics to seek forgiveness for past historical errors" (Alessandra Stanley, *New York Times*).

- 1998: "Cardinal William Keeler . . . asked forgiveness from fellow Catholics for the church's legacy of slavery and segregation, calling racism 'a spiritual malady that gnawed at the moral fiber of our nation, our community and our church'" (John Biemer, *Associated Press*).

- 2000: "At an outdoor mass in Warsaw in May the Polish church's leader, Cardinal Jozef Glemp, pointedly asked for forgiveness for priests who still tolerate anti-Semitism" (Beata Pasek, *The Associated Press*).

- A thoughtful Seventh-day Adventist 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" (1996: Ella Rydzewski, *Adventist Review*; written after the horrendous 1995 massacres in Rwanda where some Rwandan Seventh-day Adventist leaders participated).

- Naomi Wolf writing in *George* says: "Plenty of whites would say that memorializing our slave past is worse than unimportant, that it is destructive to the present. . . . 'I didn't own any slaves. Why should I apologize?' as one recent caller to a talk radio station characteristically argued."

The same argument in principle is often heard within the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The "1888" history was over long ago; to bring it up now "is destructive to the present." It disturbs our good feelings, our pride.

As these other churches acknowledge their corporate involvement in injustices of past centuries, "we" have our corporate wrong that has affected generations of our people and has deprived the world of something "most precious." The God of heaven "sent" messengers and a message to us that was the "beginning" of the work of that "other angel" of Revelation

18 and consequently also the beginning of the latter rain. "In a great degree," an inspired messenger says, "we" rejected it and "kept it away from our people and from the world."

Well over a hundred times she says that "we" treated that message and those who bore it "as the Jews treated Christ." She adds that the books of heaven record that "we" "insulted the Holy Spirit" at an official General Conference Session. None of our officially approved histories makes this fact prominent.

Just to "apologize" would be meaningless; to pass a resolution of official "confession" is an empty gesture. We are not concerned for ourselves. We owe something to *the world*. A "work meet for repentance" (John the Baptist's phrase) would be to give that authentic "most precious message" to the church, and thence to the world population who deserve to hear it.

## NIGHT WATCHMAN

Lord, I feel sorry for You tonight.  
A sheltered child, I sleep secure, content;  
No swordlike, piercing pain of tortured folk  
On lonely sickbeds stabs my sovereign skin;  
I sense no anguished dread in dying hearts.

No tattered waifs from Africa besmudge  
My windows with their dirty hands, or peer  
Inside with hungry eyes that plead for love.  
Yet they crowd around Your windows looking in!

No cursed untouchables on Bombay streets  
Beg leave to make my lawn their bed tonight.

I hear no heartsick sob in vice-cursed haunt,  
Nor curdling scream of suicide's dark leap,  
Nor soldier's pain-racked gasp in alien land.

I sense no shock of riven flesh in crash  
On bloody road. I cannot even surmise  
The reason for my next-door neighbor's tears!

But through the starlit hours You may not sleep.  
You dare not look the other way, avert Your gaze.  
You watch each twitch of pain, and count  
Our sighs, Yours the helpless agony  
To feel our universal tragedy.

Lord, I feel sorry for You tonight—  
But is there something I might do to help?

—Robert J. Wieland

## *Foreword*

This book deals with the basic problem of heart-motivation, searching the recesses of the Adventist conscience. After 6000 years of waiting, the Saviour makes His last plea. But it has gone unheeded for well over a century.

How long can we continue with "business as usual"?

There are those in the church who say that persecution must solve our spiritual problem. But is persecution the cause or the effect of revival and reformation among God's people? How does persecution fit into the Day of Atonement that we have long believed is vital to the final ministry of the True Witness?

We are not the first people to have misunderstood a message God sent. The ancient Jews brought grief to the Messiah because they were certain they understood—but they didn't get it. His unheeded call to repent could hardly have brought more heartbreak to the Saviour than the lukewarm, unknowing response He has received from the last of the "seven churches" of history.

The Jews were expecting the Son of David to take the throne and rule in splendor. Their national rejection of Him parallels our letting Him remain outside our door, knocking for admission. So says Ellen White.

How could the Lord of the universe do more than He has done to plead with His "angel of the church of the Laodiceans"?

May the Lord use the message of this book to clarify that call of the True Witness for the repentance of the ages. The great High Priest wants to proclaim, "It is done." The power of the gospel and the final atonement will be demonstrated to be complete.

— *Donald K. Short*

## *Introduction*

In the ancient kingdoms of Israel and Judah, the Lord's almost constant problem was what to do with human leadership. King after king led the people into apostasy until the two nations were devastated and had to go into captivity under pagan rule.

But never has the Lord had a more difficult problem to solve than the lukewarmness of "the angel of the church of the Laodiceans," the human leadership of His last-day remnant church. The solution Christ proposes is to "repent."

Our "historic" understanding has been that such repentance is personal, or individual. This sounds simple enough, but after more than a century and a half that experience seems to have eluded us. We still need myriads of personal repentances, but could it be that He is addressing us as a corporate body, and therefore He is calling for corporate repentance?

The One who gave Himself on His cross to redeem us has every right to call us to repentance, for it was He who died our corporate second death in our stead. But the vast proportion of the world still understands little or nothing of the love that prompted that divine sacrifice. We haven't yet told them clearly enough.

How can the Lord solve His problem? Will it help to let punitive judgments, disasters, and more terrorism come upon us? More terrible world wars? More lethal epidemics? More storms and earthquakes? Or could it be that understanding a still small voice calling us to denominational repentance will be effective?

Hopefully this modest contribution may help to demonstrate that such repentance makes very good sense, and is indeed a gift of God not to be refused.

## Chapter One

### A FAX Direct From Heaven

*Does Jesus Christ call the Seventh-day Adventist Church to repentance?  
Or does He merely call for it from some individuals within the church?*

A FAX direct from Heaven could not be more arresting than Christ's one command to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans: "Be zealous, therefore, and repent." To whom does He say this? What does He mean—"repent"? "The angels of the seven churches" and "the churches" are not the same. They are distinct. "The seven candlesticks ... are the seven churches." But "the seven stars you saw in My right hand," He says, are "the angels" who symbolize the leadership (Revelation 1:20). Since He addresses the message to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans, it must be more than individual or personal repentance He calls for.

God's ministers are symbolized by the seven stars, which He who is the first and the last has under His special care and protection. The sweet influences that are to be abundant in the church are bound up with these ministers of God.... The stars of heaven are under God's control.... So with His ministers. They are but instruments in His hands ... (*Gospel Workers*, pages 13, 14).

That "angel" of the Laodicean church must include Sabbath School leaders; academy, college, and university teachers; local elders; deacons; Pathfinder leaders; pastors; local and Union conference leaders; and of course General Conference leadership—all who guide the church.

Therefore this total body of leadership is the focus of Christ's special attention in the Laodicean message. It is not in any way disrespectful to the human leadership of the church to give attention to what the True Witness says.

Laodicea is the seventh church of history, the last one just before the second coming of Christ. It is parallel with the proclamation of the three angels' messages of Revelation 14. No eighth church can follow. The message cannot be bad news, for Laodicea is not a bad word. It simply means "vindicating the people."<sup>1</sup> Heeding the call to repent redeems Laodicea from failure and provides her with her only hope.

#### How Long Have We Known the Message?

In our early denominational history the message was taken quite seriously. As far back as 1856, our pioneers expected that it would lead into the latter rain and the final loud cry within their generation. But with the lapse of well over a century of *seeming* indifference on the part of Heaven, we have thought the message is either not very urgent or perhaps has already done its work. For whatever reason, it has been relegated to the back burner. Our modern culture is deeply obsessed with the need for cultivating self-esteem, both personal and denominational, and this message appears to be not very good at doing that. Hence it has also become rather unpopular to talk about it.

Since we have assumed that the message is addressed only to individuals, its application has been so widely scattered that it has had no real focus. We have not known

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<sup>1</sup> Note that the Father has refused to judge us, but has committed all judgment unto the Son, because He is the Son of man (John 5:22, 27). Christ likewise says He refuses to judge those who do not believe in Him. Therefore the only people whom He will judge are those who believe in Him, and He will vindicate them (John 12:47, 48).

what to do about it. Everybody else's business is nobody's business. But the possibility that Christ's appeal is for *corporate* repentance casts the message in an entirely different focus. If He is calling for corporate repentance, it follows that He is also calling for denominational repentance.

### **Is He Serious?**

Why is He so concerned? He can't forget that He gave His blood *for the world*. "The angel of the church of Laodicea" is represented in Revelation as standing between heaven's light and a dark world, intercepting it. The outcome of the issue in Revelation 3 determines the outcome of the entire Book of Revelation. Defeat in chapter 3 will hold up or even prevent the victory of chapter 19. We, the "angel" or leadership, have delayed for a century the final purpose of God to lighten the world with the glory of the "everlasting gospel" in its end-time setting. The ultimate success of the great plan of redemption thus requires that the "angel" heed Christ's message and overcome. If Laodicea should fail, that entire plan would suffer a disastrous final defeat.

The reason is obvious. Seventh-day Adventists do not hold the doctrine of the Roman Catholic and Protestant churches that saved people go to heaven immediately at death. We believe that all the righteous dead must remain in their graves until a corporate resurrection. But this "first resurrection" depends on the personal return of Jesus, which in turn depends on a group of living saints getting ready for His coming. The reason for this is that "our God is a consuming fire" to sin (Hebrews 12:29). Christ dares not return until He has a people in whose hearts all sin has been blotted out. Otherwise, His coming would consume them, and He loves them too much to do that to them. Thus it is His love that requires Him to wait until He has such a people ready. It follows that, until then, all the righteous dead are doomed to remain prisoners in their graves.

Can we begin to see how an enemy has been infiltrating this church with the "new theology" lie that it is impossible for a people to overcome sin *per se*? Since the success of the entire plan of salvation depends on its final hour, Satan is fighting his last-ditch stand at this point.

For sure, Heaven is not concerned about our perpetuating an organizational machine for the sake of denominational pride, like General Motors struggling to maintain its image in the face of foreign competition. Heaven is concerned about the tragic need of the *world* for that pure gospel message which alone can bring deliverance from sin to all who call upon the name of the Lord. Suffering humanity weighs on the heart of God more than our concern for our denominational image. If "the angel of the church of the Laodiceans" is standing in Heaven's way, the Lord's message to that "angel" must get through. Heaven's *seeming* indifference is deceptive; the Lord is moving the very stones themselves to cry out:

All heaven is in activity, and the angels of God are waiting to cooperate with all who will devise plans whereby souls for whom Christ died may hear the glad tidings of salvation.... Souls are perishing out of Christ, and those who profess to be Christ's disciples are letting them die.... Oh, that God would set this matter in all its importance before the sleeping churches! (*Testimonies*, vol. 6, pages 433, 434).

### **The True Head Of the Seventh-day Adventist Church**

Jesus introduces Himself as "the Amen, the faithful and true witness." Why is He the true Head of the Seventh-day Adventist Church? He gave His blood for His church. He alone can convey truth to her. No committee or institution can control Him or forever suppress His message. The word 'Amen' indicates that He is still in business as the living witness to

the church. Above the conflicting din of present-day voices, we are told that He will see to it that His message comes through loud and clear:

Amid the confusing cries, "Lo, here is Christ! Lo, there is Christ!" will be borne a special testimony, a special message of truth appropriate for this time (Ellen G. White, *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, page 984).

Ellen White has bemoaned our constant tendency to put fallible human beings between Christ and ourselves. Note how in one short paragraph she tells us of this idolatry no less than five times:

It has been Satan's determined purpose to eclipse the view of Jesus, and lead men to look *to man*, and trust *to man*, and be educated to expect help *from man*. For years the church has been looking *to man*, and expecting much *from man*, but not looking to Jesus (*Testimonies to Ministers*, page 93; 1896; emphasis supplied).

### **Imagine Jesus Christ as Guest Speaker!**

Christ has "eyes like a flame of fire" (Revelation 2:18). His message is no bandaid solution to our problems, no strategy that a committee can devise. It is a solemn and holy message; we will bring upon ourselves the judgment of the ages if we disregard it. If Christ were invited to be guest speaker to the human leadership of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, His message would be that of Revelation 3:14-21. He would stir our souls to their depths. And He has the utmost right to speak thus to us!

This topic of corporate repentance has been sharply contested for over 40 years.<sup>2</sup> General Conference opposition has been intense and pervasive. But in recent months two prominent General Conference authors have rescued the topic from disrepute and made it eligible for serious discussion.<sup>3</sup> The *Senior Sabbath School Quarterly* for early 1992 openly discussed the need for it. Could it be that the Lord's providence has opened the way for us to inquire further into what His call means? His call to "repent" must somehow make sense to us today, and to our youth as well. We can only seek humbly to understand it. In this modest volume we search for its meaning.

### **When Will We Respond to the Lord?**

Repentance is not something that we *do*. It is never accomplished by voting on a committee. It is a gift from the Lord that has to be humbly and thankfully received (Acts 5:31). But how can we ever find the time to receive such a gift? There is always the eternal pressure of "do" hanging over us all. And when will we find the will to receive? The recent book co-authored by two General Conference leaders plaintively asks,

Will we do the work of spiritual preparation that God calls for, and allow Him to use us to finish His work on earth? Or are we going to let another opportunity slip through our fingers and find ourselves and our children in this sinful world for another 50 or 60 years? (Neal C. Wilson and George E. Rice, *The Power of the Spirit*, page 53).

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Norval E Pease, *By Faith Alone*, foreword by the General Conference president, R. R. Figuhr (1962); A. V. Olson, *Through Crisis to Victory*, pages 237-239 (1966); L. E. Froom, *Movement of Destiny*, pages 357, 358, 445, 451, 686 (1971); George R. Knight, *From 1888 to Apostasy*, page 64 (1987); George R. Knight, *Angry Saints*, pages 130, 131, 150, 151 (1989).

<sup>3</sup> See *The Power of the Spirit*, by George E. Rice and Neal C. Wilson (Review and Herald, 1991).



Can you imagine the disappointment ancient Israel would have felt if Joshua had told them at the River Jordan after already wandering for 40 years, "Sorry, folks, we must go back to the wilderness to wander for another generation"? But such a delay has already happened repeatedly in our denominational history, and the greatest disappointment has been to the Lord Himself.

As we near the end we are seeing centrifugal forces at work within the church trying to force dissension and disunion. Some may conclude that these unprecedented buffetings mean that Jesus Christ has abandoned the church. But His appeal to "the angel of the church" proves that He has not done so. His greatest concern, Heaven's highest priority, is to effect revival, reformation, and repentance *within this church*. He does care.

What does He say to us?

## Chapter Two

### **Not a Word of Praise from Jesus!**

*It appears that we are better pleased with ourselves than Christ is with us.*

*But if His truth hurts, it also heals.*

**Unto the angel of the church of the Laodiceans, write ..."** (Revelation 3:14, KJV).

For many decades we have assumed that the message is addressed to the church at large. But surprisingly, the message is addressed to its leadership. We leaders have often erred in passing the message on to the laity, berating them, and blaming them for holding up the finishing of God's work.

If the message is addressed primarily to individuals in the church, we have some serious problems. Seventh-day Adventists have been dying for nearly 150 years. In practically all these funerals, we have expressed the confident hope that the deceased will arise in the first resurrection, something impossible without their personal, individual repentance.

Therefore, if Christ's call to repent has been addressed primarily to individuals, it has already been largely heeded, for we must assume that many of these faithful saints did repent in preparation for death. In that case, the Laodicean message becomes virtually a dead letter. We can expect little if any further result except continued personal repentance as has prevailed for well over a century. This is how the great bulk of our people, especially youth, now view the message.

Although each of us must apply individually and personally any counsel in the messages to the seven churches, this call to "repent" is specifically addressed to more than individuals. And when we begin to understand to whom it is addressed, the content of the message itself also takes on a more arresting significance.

The appeal in Revelation 3:20 ("if any man hear my voice") contains a significant Greek word, *tis*, which primarily means "a *certain* one," not just "*any* one." For example, it was not just "any man" who "fled away ... naked" at the betrayal of Jesus as told in Mark 14:51, 52. The word *tis* is used and is translated as "a *certain* young man." In the Laodicean message, it would obviously refer to the "angel" as *the certain one* to whom the message is addressed. Unquestionably, Jesus quotes the Song of Solomon in His appeal, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock" (5:2, LXX). The "certain one" who must hear is His beloved, the church. The Lord

appoints leadership to role models and examples. Christ said of Himself, "For their sakes I sanctify Myself" (John 17:19).

"I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot... So then, because you are lukewarm ... I will spew you out of My mouth" (Revelation 3:16). We could superficially conclude that because the "angel" is undeniably "lukewarm," automatically Christ has kept His promise and has rejected us. This assumption is based on the KJV and some other translations. It has posed a serious problem to some sincere church members and caused them to despair of the organized church ever becoming truly reconciled to Christ.

But the original language includes a key word, *mello*, that means, "I am *about* to spit you out" (NIV). It becomes clear in Revelation 10:4, where John says he was "about to write" what "the seven thunders had uttered," but he did not write, for "a voice from heaven" forbade him. Jesus stands poised, on the brink of vomiting us out. What He actually says in vivid modern language is, "You make Me so sick at My stomach that I feel like throwing up!"

This is a normal human phenomenon in extreme emotional disgust. A wife in East Germany read her newly released STASI file (the Communist Secret Police). She found to her horror that during years of pretended loyal fidelity her husband had been secretly informing on her to the dreaded police. Her involuntary reaction: she went to the bathroom and vomited. Unpleasant as it may appear to us, Jesus tells us that this is how He feels, not about us, but about our cherished lukewarmness. This does not mean that He does not love us, or that He is not faithful to us. (The German lady also loved her husband!)

### **Why Does Jesus Feel This Way?**

Why doesn't He say something good about us? Is He too severe? Any president of a company, board chairman, or military officer, knows that he must praise his subordinates in order for them to do their best. The human leadership of the remnant church is surely the finest group of people in the world! Wouldn't it be wise of Christ to say at least something nice about us, how diligent we are, how clever we are, what we have achieved after our 150 years of trying so hard? But He doesn't.

For sure, He is not trying to discourage us. He simply wants us to face reality, so that we can correct the problem and prepare to hear Him at last say "Well done!" when the commendation will mean something.

His answer, explaining why He feels like throwing up, helps us understand the reality of our situation. We haven't realized it, but it's devastating. The next vision of Revelation introduces Him as a "Lamb as though it had been slain" before whom the hosts of Heaven and the "twenty-four elders" bow in heartfelt worship, singing an anthem of total devotion:

"You were slain,  
And have redeemed us to God by Your blood  
Out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation,  
And have made us kings and priests to our God"

(Revelation 5:6, 9).

All Heaven understands and appreciate what it cost Him to redeem us, how He went even to hell, how He tasted the equivalent of our second death, to save us. They sense the "width and length and depth and height" of that "love of Christ which passes knowledge." In contrast, "the angel" of the church of the Laodiceans, living in the concentrated light of six thousand years of Good News revelation is not deeply moved. When we should feel the same degree of appreciation, our little shriveled-up hearts are half-frozen. "You are lukewarm," Jesus says.

No wonder our superficial professions of love and devotion are nauseating to Him. He gave everything for us! When He compares the extent of His sacrificial devotion with the meagerness of our heart-response, He is acutely embarrassed before the watching universe. Is it hard for us to imagine how painful this is for Him?

### **Let Us See Reality as Heaven Sees It**

Here we stand on the verge of the final crisis when our spiritual maturity should be so far greater than it is. Yet our childish indifference hurts Him. Peter's cowardly denial of Him at His trial was easier for Him to bear than our mild and calculating devotion in such a time as this.

Arnold Wallenkampf comments incisively on the nauseating aspects of the "group-think" mentality that was so common among Seventh-day Adventist leaders and ministers a century ago and still is so today:

The main fault for the rejection of the 1888 message lay not with the people at large but with the ministers.

This startling disclosure must be seriously considered by each person in our church today who is a Seventh-day Adventist minister or a teacher or a leader in any capacity (*What Every Adventist Should Know About 1888*, page 90).

Many of the delegates to the Minneapolis conference became accomplices in the sin of rejecting the message of righteousness by faith, through action according to the laws of group dynamics. Since many of their respected and beloved leaders rejected the message at Minneapolis they followed these leaders in rejecting it ... what we today call groupthink...

It is not a pleasant thought, but nevertheless it is true that at the Minneapolis Conference leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church reenacted the role of the Jewish leaders in the day of Jesus. During Christ's ministry on earth the Jewish people were preponderantly favorable to Him. It was the Jewish leaders who later urged them to demand His crucifixion. At the Minneapolis conference in 1888 it was the leading brethren who spearheaded the opposition against the message (*Ibid*, pages 45-47).

### **But What Has This to Do With Us Today?**

Jesus does not say that it was the ancient Jews' rejection and crucifixion of Him that makes Him want to vomit. What bothers Him is that the "angel" of the church on the stage of history in the *final* act of the great\* drama, knowing the history of the Jews, should repeat it while warmly professing to love Him. We can appreciate His nausea if we consider how sickening it is to see any adult acting out the naive fantasies of a child.

He says that we "say, I am rich, and I have been enriched, and I have need of nothing" (Revelation 3:17, Greek). We don't say this verbally, but He correctly hears the language of the heart:

The lips may express a poverty of soul that the heart does not acknowledge. While speaking to God of poverty of spirit, the heart may be swelling with the conceit of its own superior humility and exalted righteousness (*Christ's Object Lessons*, page 159).

Yet we are naive about our true state in full view of the universe. Even in the eyes of thoughtful non-Adventists we pose a pathetic sight. The literal Greek sharpens the impact

by inserting a little article *ho*, which means *the* one: "You don't know that of all the seven churches you are *the* one that is outstandingly wretched, and *the* one who is miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked" (verse 17).

No one of us as a mere individual is worthy of this distinction on the stage of world history! Christ must be addressing us as a corporate body.

### **There is Hope for Us**

The Lord would not spend the remainder of the chapter telling us how to respond if He had already finally rejected us. We make Him sick at His stomach, but He pleads with us to relieve His pain. This message to Laodicea is the most critically sensitive and urgent in Scripture. The success of the entire plan of salvation depends upon its final hour; and Laodicea's problem is bound up with that crisis.

Jesus says, "I counsel you to buy of me gold tried in the fire" (verse 18). In addressing the Seventh-day Adventist denomination and in particular its leadership, He tells us that the first thing we need is ... not more works, more activity, more strategies and programs. He told us in verse 15, "I know your works." Our works are already feverishly intense. Peter identifies the "gold tried in the fire" as the essential ingredient in believing the gospel—the faith itself, which always *precedes* any works of genuine righteousness (1 Peter 1:7).

In other words, Jesus tells us that what we first need is what we have long confidently claimed that we already possess—the knowledge and experience of righteousness by faith. But what we have moves us only to lukewarmness. It is the true understanding that causes the hosts of Heaven to serve so ardently "the Lamb who was slain." They are totally moved by the very heart of the message—"Christ and Him crucified," a motivation that shames us for our petty obsession with our own eternal security. Christ's diagnosis strikes at the root of our leadership pride.

### **The Subtlety of Our Spiritual Pride**

Until the publication of Wallenkampf's book in 1988, our denominational press generally maintained that we were "enriched" at the time our leadership supposedly accepted the beginning of the loud cry message a century ago.<sup>1</sup> In recent years we have begun to take an abrupt about-face, and now the truth is openly recognized that "we" did not accept it.<sup>2</sup> This new candor is phenomenal and refreshing.

But surely Christ doesn't tell us now that we still need that "gold" of genuine faith? Yes, He says that in order for us to heal Him of His painful nausea we need the "gold" of genuine faith, and furthermore we need to buy it—that is, *pay something* in exchange for it.

But why doesn't He *give* it to us? He insists that we exchange for the genuine our helpless views of righteousness by faith which have nurtured our lukewarmness. We are caught in an obvious contradiction, claiming that we adequately understand and preach righteousness by faith, when its proper fruits have been too sadly lacking. This is attested by the pervasive lukewarmness of the church. As lukewarmness is a mixture of cold and hot water, so our spiritual problem is a mixture of legalism and a poorly understood gospel.

A good dinner of wholesome food is ruined by even a slight mixture of arsenic. We have reached the point in world history where even a little legalism mixed with our "gospel" has become lethal. The confusion of past ages is no longer good enough for today. Believing the pure unadulterated gospel (in the Biblical sense) is wholly incompatible with any

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<sup>1</sup> Examples: *The Fruitage of Spiritual Gifts*, by L. H. Christian, 1947; *Captains of the Host*, by A. W. Spalding, 1949; *Through Crisis to Victory*, by A. V. Olson, 1966; *Movement of Destiny*, by L. E. Froom, 1971; *The Lonely Years*, by A. L. White, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> See for example the February 1988 issue of *Ministry*; *What Every Adventist Should Know About 1888*, by Arnold Wallenkampf; *From 1888 to Apostasy* by George Knight, and *Angry Saints*, by the same author.

lukewarmness. The presence of lukewarmness betrays an underlying or subliminal legalism, a recognition that we as leaders are embarrassed to acknowledge.

We have thought that we possess the essentials of that "most precious message." What we have done is to import Evangelical ideas from popular churches who have no understanding of the unique truth of the cleansing of the sanctuary:

As the Jews crucified Jesus, so the nominal churches had crucified these messages, and therefore they have no knowledge of the way into the most holy [place], and they can not be benefited by the intercession of Jesus there. Like the Jews, who offered their useless sacrifices, they offer up their useless prayers to the apartment which Jesus has left; and Satan, pleased with the deception, assumes a religious character, and leads the minds of these professed Christians to himself, working with his power, his signs and lying wonders, to fasten them in his snare (*Early Writings*, page 261).

This gradual process of absorption has accelerated for decades. We can never obtain the genuine, says Jesus, until we are humble and honest enough to give up, to exchange, the counterfeit to "buy" the genuine.

It is at this point that Christ meets resistance from us. Almost invariably we pastors, evangelists, administrators, theologians, leaders, teachers and independent ministries, will protest that we have no *lack* of understanding. Conservative "historic Adventists" and arch-liberals alike make the same boast from their antithetical positions. Group-think loyalty forces us to insist that we do understand, thus we "have need of nothing." Feeling competent, we cannot "hunger and thirst after righteousness [by faith]" because we are already full.<sup>3</sup> We need only a louder voice, more clever ways to "market" what we already understand.

### **The Heart of the Problem**

The issue is not whether we understand and preach the popular version of righteousness by faith *as do the Sunday-keeping Evangelical churches*. We can do that for a thousand years and still fail to give the unique message the Lord has "commanded" us to give.<sup>4</sup> God has not called us to ecumenism. Rather, what have we done with the advanced light that Ellen White said was "the beginning" of the loud cry and the latter rain?<sup>5</sup>

If it is true that we have powerfully proclaimed righteousness by faith for decades, why haven't we turned the world upside down as the apostles did? If genuine righteousness by faith is the light that will lighten the earth with glory (Revelation 18:1-4), why haven't we lightened the earth with it? And why are we losing so large a percentage of our own youth in North America?

Could it be that we are actually making the proud claim that Christ charges on us in His Laodicean message? His diagnosis is on target. The Lord's servant has often said that when we do "buy" the "gold-tried-in-the-fire" kind of righteousness by faith, the gospel commission will be speedily finished like fire going in the stubble.<sup>6</sup> That hasn't really happened yet—not with 900 million Muslims and nearly a billion Hindus still unreached, plus many millions more professed Christians and others.

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<sup>3</sup> Note that there is only one kind of righteousness that Jesus says it is "blessed" to "hunger" for—the kind that is by faith (Matthew 5:6).

<sup>4</sup> compare *Testimonies to Ministers*, pages 91, 92.

<sup>5</sup> See *Review and Herald*, November 22, 1892.

<sup>6</sup> See *Selected Messages*, Book One, page 118.

Here we come to the great continental divide in Adventism. At this point we turn to one side or the other. Either Jesus is wrong when He says we are "poor" and "wretched" and we *are* "rich" as we claim; or we are indeed "poor" and He has put His finger on our most sensitive plague spot of leadership pride. His words were a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense to the leaders of the ancient Jews; are they that to us as well?

### **Something Else That's Not "Free"**

Christ makes even clearer that we must give up something, pay something, when He specifies the second purchase that we must "buy" from Him—"white garments that you may be clothed, that the shame of your nakedness may not be revealed" (verse 18). Addressing the angel of the church, He makes clear that it is as a *denomination* that we appear in this shameful condition. The remedy He urges upon us involves the basic principle of corporate guilt and repentance:

(a) We cannot "buy" this robe of Christ's righteousness to put on 99% or less; we need it 100%. Righteousness is never in any way innate; never our own. All that we have of ourselves is unrighteousness. In other words, except for the grace of Christ, we are no better than any other people. If we had no Saviour, we would be stark "naked." The sins of others would be our sins, but for His grace.

(b) The realization of this truth humbles our pride in the dust. There is no way for us to obtain that special robe of His righteousness unless we first become conscious of our spiritual nakedness and are willing to exchange our false ideas for the truth, which alone can cover our shame.

The impact of His call does *seem* extreme. Are we not a prosperous, well-respected denomination of some six million members with great institutions? Do we not claim to be one of the fastest-growing churches in the world? Why doesn't Christ appropriately praise us according to our achievements?

(c) He is not talking about achievements. The problem of our "nakedness" is our lack of understanding the gospel itself. This is where the charge hits the raw nerve of denominational self-esteem and arouses our indignation. If we can deflect the point of Christ's words by insisting that He is speaking only to us as individuals, we can always duck out. We can assume that it is some other individual who is spiritually "naked" while corporately we are well-dressed. It is only when we understand "the angel" to be the corporate leadership of the church that we begin to squirm most uncomfortably. Our pleasant sense of being denominationally well-clothed is rudely dissipated.

(d) Consider for example the plight of another body of professed Christians—the Mormons. Their theological "garments" have been their trust in the divine inspiration of Joseph Smith and his writing of the Book of Mormon. But plain evidence for all the world to see indicates that the foundation of their "faith" is a monstrous fraud. In proportion to their knowledge of those facts and their intellectual honesty, imagine their corporate shame!

In our case, our problem is not our "27 doctrines" or our history. Their general validity is unquestioned. Our corporate nakedness is our want of the one truth that alone can make those "27" meaningful—"the message of Christ's righteousness" which the Lord tried to give us a century ago. That message would lighten the earth with glory if we "had" it:

Justification by faith in Christ will be made manifest in transformation of character. This is the sign to the world of the truth of the doctrines we profess (*Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, page 1532).

One interest will prevail, one subject will swallow up every other,— CHRIST OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS (*Review and Herald Extra*, December 23, 1890).

How long can we go on proudly insisting that we have the genuine article?

In the case of the Mormons, as a corporate body they probably do not care about their theological and historical predicament because (and we speak kindly) they are not a people who were raised up by the truth of the third angel's message. They do not profess to stand before the world as those who "keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus." Nor do they have a keen sense of spiritual conscience as Ellen White's writings have imbued in us. If the Mormons can sustain their community socially and economically, they will probably be content corporately to go on without that "white garment" of Christ's righteousness to cover their historical and theological shame

But we cannot do so, for we possess a corporate conscience devoted above all else to truth. This church was raised up by sheer force of the word of truth. Praise the Lord; our conscience will inevitably be aroused by Christ's "straight testimony." Especially in North America, the cradle of Adventism, where our "nakedness" is becoming increasingly apparent, we will sooner or later be forced by reality to face what Christ says.

The realization of a shared corporate guilt saves us from the pitfall of a holier-than-thou fantasy. No one of us can criticize another; we partake together of the fault for which Jesus rebukes us.

### **When We Can "See" Our Nakedness We Will Naturally Have Discernment**

The third item Jesus specifies is the "eyesalve, that you may see" (verse 18). The Lord tells us to anoint our eyes with the eyesalve He offers. Once we "buy" the "gold" and the "white garments," our vision will automatically be clarified. We will begin to see ourselves as the watching universe sees us and as thoughtful people see us (who we say are still in "Babylon"). The picture is clearly more than the need merely of individuals.

What is at stake is the image of the Seventh-day Adventist Church at view in current world history. Our divine destiny requires us to make a far greater impact on world thinking. That impact of the future will not be our charitable "works," in which others will always far out-do us. It will be the Good News content of our message. It will be a distinct, unique presentation of righteousness by faith—in a message that goes far beyond the message by the same name of the popular churches. Once we learn to "see," we shall immediately discern the contrasts between what we have assumed is righteousness by faith and what is the genuine "third angel's message in verity" that Ellen White recognized is implicit in the actual concepts of the loud cry message.

Christ now gives us the only direct command in His message: "As many as I love, I rebuke and chasten. Therefore be zealous and repent" (verse 19). Our sinful nature instinctively recoils against this kind of love—the chastening kind. We must therefore not be surprised that Christ's serious call to repentance meets with resentment from those whom He loves and resistance from those who love not the truth.

But He assures us that He loves us with close, intimate family love (*philo*, He says) which justifies rebuke and chastening and makes it possible for us to endure. Ellen White's life-ministry is an example. The Spirit of Prophecy has never flattered us! Neither does "the testimony of Jesus," its Author.

There is ample reason to search further for the meaning of that all-important command of the True Witness, "Repent."

## Chapter Three

# The Fundamental Truth: Christ's Church as His Corporate Body

*Our laborious exhortations to become a "caring church" have wearied us. Endless commands to "do" something are transcended by a simple divine invitation to "see" something.*

To understand what is involved in Christ's call to repentance we must consider Paul's brilliant metaphor of the church as a "body." We sustain a corporate relationship to one another and to Christ Himself as our Head. Although this idea is foreign to much of our Western thinking, it is essential to the Bible concepts.

In fact, the word "corporate" is a good Bible word, for Paul addresses his letters "to believers incorporate in Christ" (Ephesians 1:1; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:1, etc.; Romans 6:5, NEB). 'As the body is one and has many members, ... so also is Christ' (1 Corinthians 12:12). Paul goes on to illustrate his idea.

There is a corporate unity of the "one body" (verse 13), a corporate diversity of its various "members" (verses 15-18), a corporate need felt by all ("the eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you,'" verses 21, 22), a corporate balance of the various members (verses 23, 24), a corporate "care" they feel for each other and for the head (verse 25), and corporate suffering and rejoicing which all the members share together (verse 26). If I stub my toe on a sharp rock, my whole body feels the pain. If the leg could speak it would say, "I'm sorry; I projected the toe against the rock." The eye would say, "No, it's my fault; I should have seen the sharp rock."

### The Meaning of the Word "Corporate"

The word "body" is a noun, and the word "bodily" is an adverb; but there is no meaningful English adjective that can describe the nature of this relationship within the "body" except the word "corporate" from the Latin word for body, *corpus*. The dictionary defines it as "relating to a whole composed of individuals."

Your own experience can make this plain. What happens when you stub your toe badly? At once you realize the corporate relationship of the limbs and organs of your body. You stop while your whole body cooperates by rubbing the hurting toe to lessen the pain. You may even hurt all over. Your other organs and limbs feel a corporate concern for that wounded toe, as if each feels the pain. "If one organ suffers, they all suffer together" (1 Corinthians 12:26, NEB).

Any amputation in the body becomes a "schism" to be avoided at almost any cost. Likewise, any measure of disunity or misunderstanding or lack of compassion in the church is foreign to Christ and His body. It is as alien as disease or accident is to our human body. Sin is such an accident to the "body of Christ," and guilt is its disease. Often we suffer disease without knowing which organ is ill, or even what causes it. We can also suffer from sin without knowing what it is. How can sin have both a personal and corporate nature?

In malarial areas, people are bitten by the anopheles mosquito, and infected with the disease. Some ten days after the bite, the parasites in the blood stream produce malarial fever. Not only is the one "member" such as the finger affected which received the mosquito bite, but the whole body partakes of the common fever. The blood stream has carried the parasites everywhere. *This is a corporate disease.*



When we receive an injection of an anti-malarial drug in one "member," the arm receiving it is not the only member to benefit. The medicine begins to course throughout the blood stream. Soon the entire body is healed of the disease, and the fever disappears over all the body, not just in the one "member." *This is a corporate healing.*

The 17th century poet John Donne grasped the idea:

No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main; if a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friends or of thine own were; any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee (*Devotions*, XVII).

It would have been a short step more for Donne to have said, "Any man's sin diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind. And therefore never send to know who crucified the Christ; it was you."

This solidarity of humanity can be illustrated by lions. A few lions in Africa become man-eaters, but most never get to taste of human beings. Does this mean that some lions are good and others are bad? There is no difference so far as lion character is concerned. Given the right circumstances, any hungry lion will be a man-eater.

Does Jesus say in His message to Laodicea that our pride, our blindness, our spiritual poverty, our wretchedness, are corporate? Do we partake of a common spiritual disease that is like a fever to a body or a lion's nature—something pervading the whole? The Hebrew mind says yes.

### **The Bible Idea of "Adam"**

The Bible writers perceived the whole of humanity as being one corporate man—the fallen "Adam." "In Adam all die" (1 Corinthians 15:22). An outstanding example is found in Hebrews. Paul said that Levi paid "tithes in Abraham. For he was yet in the loins of his [great-grand] father, when Melchizedek met him." Abraham did not yet have even one son (Hebrews 7:9, 10, KJV). Daniel asks forgiveness for the sins of "our fathers," saying, "We have not obeyed the voice of the Lord our God," although he himself had been obedient (9:8-11).

Human sin is personal, but it is also corporate, for "all alike have sinned," and "all the world [has] become guilty before God" (Romans 3:23, NEB; 3:19, KJV). Adam's real guilt was that of crucifying Christ, although his original sin was 4000 years removed; no one of us "in Adam" is even now excused. What is our basic human nature? The answer is unpalatable—we are by nature at enmity with God, and await only the proper circumstances to demonstrate it. A few people did demonstrate this for us by crucifying the Son of God. In them we see ourselves.

The original sin of the first pair was the acorn that grew into the oak of Calvary. Any sin that we today commit is another acorn that needs only time and circumstance to become the same oak, for "the carnal mind is enmity against God," and murder is always involved in enmity for "whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer" (Romans 8:7; 1 John 3:15, KJV).

The sin that another human has committed I could commit if Christ had not saved me from it. The righteousness of Christ cannot be a mere adjunct to my own good works, a slight push to get me over the top. My righteousness is all of Him or it is nothing. "In me . . . nothing good dwells" (Romans 7:18). If "nothing good" is there, as I am part of the corporate body of Adam, all evil *could* dwell there. Nobody else is *intrinsically* any worse than I am—apart from my Saviour. Oh, how it hurts us to begin to realize this!

Not until we can see the sin of someone else as our sin too can we learn to love him as Christ has loved us. The reason is that in loving us He took our sin upon Himself. When He died on His cross, we died with Him—in principle. For us, love is also to realize corporate identity. "Be tenderhearted, . . . just as God in Christ also forgave you" (Ephesians 4:32). Paul prays for us, not that we might "do" more works, but that we might see or "comprehend" something—the dimensions of that love (Ephesians 3:14-21).

The reality that Scripture would bring to our conscience is that we need the robe of Christ's righteousness imputed 100%. Those who crucified Christ 2000 years ago acted as our surrogates. Luther wisely says that we are all made of the same dough.

### **The Other Side of the Coin**

If this seems to be bad news, there is also good news: Christ forgave His murderers (Luke 23:34), and that means He also forgave us. Even the fallen Adam and Eve in the Garden were forgiven. But you and I can never know that forgiveness unless we "see" the sin that makes it necessary. Since God had promised them that "in the day that you eat" of the forbidden tree "you shall surely die" (Genesis 2:17), they would have died on that very day had there not been a Lamb slain for them "from the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8).

The guilt that Romans says rests upon "all the world" is "in Adam," and legal. The "trespasses" of all the world were imputed unto Christ as He died on His cross as the second or "last Adam" (2 Corinthians 5:19). That means that all the "condemnation" that the first Adam brought on the world was reversed by the second Adam, by virtue of His sacrifice (Romans 5:16-18).

Consider the Jewish nation. Those who crucified Christ asked that "His blood be on us and on our children" (Matthew 27:25). This does not mean that every individual Jew is personally more guilty than people who are Gentiles. They were invoking a blood-responsibility upon their children in a *national* sense. This is the Jews' corporate guilt. But we are in reality no better than they are. Apart from specific repentance, we share the same involvement in the crucifixion of Christ:

That prayer of Christ for His enemies embraced the world. It took in every sinner that had lived or should live, from the beginning of the world to the end of time. Upon all rests the guilt of crucifying the Son of God. To all, forgiveness is freely offered (*The Desire of Ages*, page 745).

Let us all remember that we are still in a world where Jesus, the Son of God, was rejected and crucified, where the guilt of despising Christ and preferring a robber rather than the spotless Lamb of God still rests. Unless we individually repent toward God because of transgression of His law, and exercise faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ, whom the world has rejected, we shall lie under the full condemnation that the action of choosing Barabbas instead of Christ merited. The whole world stands charged today with the deliberate rejection and murder of the Son of God... All classes and sects who reveal the same spirit of envy, hatred, prejudice, and unbelief manifested by those who put to death the Son of God—would act the same part, were the opportunity granted, as did the Jews and people of the time of Christ. They would be partakers of the same spirit that demanded the death of the Son of God (*Testimonies to Ministers*, page 38).

This is the world's corporate guilt. Note that no one bears the *condemnation* unless he repeats the sin "were the opportunity granted." But "unless we individually repent," we share the corporate guilt that is involved "in Adam."

### **Our Special Involvement in Corporate Guilt**

But as Seventh-day Adventists, we share another example of corporate guilt in a special way for a very special sin. Not that we are personally guilty, but we are the spiritual "children" of our forefathers who in a notable sense repeated the sin of the ancient Jews. This corporate guilt causes the latter rain to be withheld from us as surely as the Jews' impenitence keeps the blessings of the Messiah's ministry from them. "We" rejected the "most precious message" that the Lord sent to us and which in a special way represented Him. What our forefathers really said was similar to what the ancient Jews said, "The responsibility for delaying the coming of the Lord be on us and on our children!" In fact, Ellen White has said that "we" did worse than the Jews, for "we" had far greater light than they had. The reality of this indictment is alarming:

The light that is to lighten the whole earth with its glory was resisted, and by the action of our own brethren has been in a great degree kept away from the world (*Ellen G. White 1888 Materials*, page 1575).

These men, whose hearts should have been open to receive the heavenly messengers, were closed to its entreaties. They have ridiculed, mocked, and derided God's servants who have borne to them the message of mercy from heaven.... Had these men no fear that the sin of blasphemy might be committed by them? (*Ibid.*, page 1642).

Men professing godliness have despised Christ in the person of His messengers. Like the Jews, they reject God's message (*Ibid.*, page 1651).

You hated the messages sent from heaven. You manifested against Christ a prejudice of the very same character and more offensive to God than that of the Jewish nation.... You, and all who like yourself, had sufficient evidence, yet refused the blessing of God, were persistent in refusing because at first you would not receive it (*Ibid.*, page 1656).

We may claim that we are not repeating that sin of our forefathers; but what means the constant effort to suppress the actual message of 1888, and keep it from the people?

The ancient Jews continued in their course until "there was no remedy" for their impenitence. The wrath of the Lord at last arose against them (2 Chronicles 36:16). Then began the tragic history of the cruel world empires, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and Rome. In a sense the guilt of ancient Israel was responsible for the rise of those empires. Untold sorrow has filled the world because of the impenitence of God's people.<sup>1</sup>

Unbelieving Jews still gather at the Wailing Wall in old Jerusalem to pray for God to send them their long-awaited Messiah. A better plan would be for them to repent of rejecting Him when He came 2000 years ago, *and recover the gospel message which they lost*

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<sup>1</sup> God told Abraham, "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). Israel was intended to be the greatest nation on earth (Exodus 19:5, 6), "the light of the world" (Matthew 5:14). If they had preserved the faith of their father Abraham and had repented, Israel would have remained the greatest and most powerful nation on earth. The four cruel and tyrannous world empires had to fill a vacuum in history left by the failure of Israel.

*at that time.* We pray for the Lord to send us the gift of the latter rain so that the final message can lighten the earth with glory. Says a recent *Sabbath School Quarterly*:

At the 1990 General Conference session hundreds of people committed themselves to daily prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in both the former and latter rains. Since then thousands all over the world have been praying daily for the special blessing of the Lord. Such prayer is sure to result in changed hearts, spiritually revitalized churches, and more earnest outreach for those who do not believe. Moreover, in response to this united prayer, the Lord promises to grant the greatest outpouring of the Spirit in human history, the latter rain predicted by Joel and Peter (Teachers' Comments for March 9, 1992).

To pray for the latter rain is good. But is there something we are leaving out? We have been earnestly praying for it for a hundred years, as the Jews have been praying for the coming of their Messiah for thousands of years. Would it not be a better plan for us to repent of rejecting "the beginning" of that same blessing which the Lord sent us a century ago, *and to demonstrate our repentance by recovering the message which we lost?*

Is our Lord's call to repent as serious a matter as this? Does decade after decade of spiritual drought roll by because His call has not been seriously considered? If He calls for repentance, there must be some way that we can respond.

We must look into this more deeply.

## *Chapter Four*

### **The Disappointed Christ**

*We sing, we pray, we say we love Him. But He says He is persona non grata among us.*

Our sinful, despairing modern world desperately needs a Spirit-filled Seventh-day Adventist Church. We cherish a deep conviction: this church is the prophetic remnant of Revelation 12:17, a unique people with whom the dragon is "enraged" and makes "war." They are called to "keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ." The same group tells the world the true good news of "the everlasting gospel" (chapter 14:6-12). They are a vital ingredient in world stability.

Although this sense of destiny has kept the Seventh-day Adventist Church on course for over a century, it leaves us little room for pride because our Lord rebukes us severely in His Laodicean message. Countless sermons have been preached and articles published about that rebuke, but we today generally recognize that the problems it details still exist.

If we have successfully overcome these spiritual weaknesses, there should by now be some clear evidence to show how and when the overcoming took place. Reason dictates that when the church truly overcomes, Christ's coming can no longer be delayed. This is confirmed by His parable about the farmer (Jesus Himself): "When the grain ripens, immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come" (Mark 4:29). The "harvest" is "the end of the world" (Matthew 13:39, KJV); Revelation 14:14-16).

Why hasn't Christ's appeal to His people already done its work? When will He have a remnant church that has bought His "gold refined in the fire," His "white garments," and applied His "eye salve"? Must we assume that Christ's message will fail in the end? Some conclude that because ancient Israel failed repeatedly, modern Israel must also fail. Surely there must be better news than this!

We are living in the time for a victory that never before has taken place in history. We have been assured:

The Holy Spirit is to animate and pervade the whole church, purifying and cementing hearts.... It is the purpose of God to glorify Himself in His people before the world (*Testimonies*, vol. 9, pages 20, 21).

As surely as the Seventh-day Adventist Church is that "remnant" in Revelation, so surely must this message from Jesus succeed at last.

### **How Can We Make Sense of the Long Delay?**

Is the long delay in the coming of Christ His responsibility? It is a common understanding among us that the delay is His responsibility. But to believe this creates a terrible problem. With no hope for the future except to continue repeating the history of our past, the hope of the soon return of Christ must then fade further into uncertainty.

A special 1992 issue of the *Adventist Review* on the Second Coming reported on the well-known uncertainty of many of our youth. Cheryl R. Merritt reports the frightening reality, "We are a generation of nonconviction when it comes to Jesus' second coming." "I really don't think we can have any idea of when He'll come" (Daniel Potter, 21, Union College). "I can't imagine it happening in my lifetime" (Shawn Sugars, 22, Andrews University).

This reveals a terrible problem. If we lose our faith in the nearness of the second coming, we lose the reason for our existence as a special church. Our forefathers built into our denominational name our confidence in the soon return of Christ, for the dictionary defines the word "Adventist" not as some dim hope in a "far-off divine event," but confidence in the *soon* coming of the Lord. There is a close relationship between understanding Christ's Laodicean call to repent and our confidence in the nearness of His coming. This will be clear as we go on.

### **The Spiritual Crisis Of the Seventh-day Adventist Church**

Roland Hegstad, for many years editor of *Liberty*, said that Adventism is "not attracting our own youth because all we're doing is asking them to come play church with us" (*Adventist Review*, February 27, 1986). Christ's Laodicean message presents to them no spiritual challenge, for if we have already repented, we must by now be "rich and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing," except to carry on business as usual and work harder.

Can we have a reasonable hope that we will see the Lord's return? Did He deceive our pioneers by telling them it was "near" when all along He knew it would be delayed at least 140 years and no one knows how many more? Is the Calvinist idea true, that the sovereign Lord has predetermined the time of Jesus' second coming with no special preparation on the part of His people?

If so, this raises serious problems that involve the Lord Himself in an ethical difficulty. He has often told us through the Spirit of Prophecy that the end is "near." His messenger frequently said: "I saw ... that time can last but a very little longer" (*Early Writings*, page 58;

1850). "Only a moment of time, as it were, yet remains." "The battle of Armageddon is soon to be fought" (*Testimonies*, vol. 6, pages 14, 406; 1900). If such warnings were merely a cry of "wolf, wolf," then the Lord has not been fair with us. For Him repeatedly to say "near" when He didn't mean it or intended to define the word so we couldn't understand it, this would be unethical. Surely He doesn't treat His people this way! Further, if we say or feel that "the Lord is delaying His coming," we put ourselves in the company of the "evil servant" in the parable who says that very thing (Matthew 24:48).

Any meaningful Adventism cannot survive this doubt, because no people can be reconciled to God in a "final atonement" if they feel that He has deceived them. Even if He has only allowed their comprehension of His truth to be patently false from their very beginning, they can't trust Him.<sup>1</sup> This could be the basic problem that underlies much present apostasy and backsliding. There is a deep Adventist spiritual alienation because it appears that inspired messages have been crying "wolf, wolf."

But Scripture makes clear that there is an answer to this perplexity. While God is indeed sovereign, He has chosen to make the actual timing of Christ's second coming dependent on the spiritual preparation of His living people. This is the genius of the Seventh-day Adventist idea of the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary. The dead remain hopeless prisoners in their grave, awaiting release at the first resurrection, whenever that may come. But the living may delay or "hasten on" that resurrection because it is dependent on the second coming of Christ which in turn is dependent on their getting ready for it (2 Peter 3:12, NEB, NAS, NIV, NKJV etc. Most translations recognize the meaning of *speudo* as "hasten").

In His parable Jesus represents Himself as already eager to return, waiting only until "the grain ripens," whereupon "immediately he puts in the sickle, because the harvest has come" (Mark 4:29). In the Revelation preview of the second coming, an angel tells Him, "The time is come for You to reap, for the harvest of the earth is ripe" (Revelation 14:15). The long-delayed "marriage of the Lamb" comes quickly once "His wife has made herself ready" (Revelation 19:7). The repentance Christ calls for from Laodicea is related to the Bride making herself "ready" If she doesn't, He is disappointed.

It is the privilege of every Christian not only to look for but to hasten the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. Were all who profess His name bearing fruit to His glory, how quickly the whole world would be sown with the seed of the gospel. Quickly the last great harvest would be ripened, and Christ would come to gather the precious grain (*Christ's Object Lessons*, page 69).

To go on being lukewarm and dying, generation after generation, cannot be a proper response of a Bride to Christ's last-church appeal.

### **A Deeper Meaning in Christ's Call to Repent**

Yet if the Laodicean repentance Christ calls for has never yet taken place, this very fact gives us hope, for there is something that our repentance can rectify. Zechariah tells of a repentance that will grip the hearts of "the house of David" and "the inhabitants of Jerusalem," making possible in them a cleansing work so Christ can return (Zechariah

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<sup>1</sup> New Testament evidence indicates that Christ and His apostles did not teach the early church to expect the second coming in their generation. Second Thessalonians 2:1-10 makes clear that the apostles had at least a rudimentary comprehension of the time sweep of Daniel's prophecies. Likewise, the statement, "Behold, I come quickly" in Revelation has always been understood as applying in a proleptic sense to those living in the end of time. Surely, God has not deceived His people for 2000 years, nor have they thought so!

12:10-13:1). "The angel of the church of the Laodiceans" is equivalent to Zechariah's phrase, "the house of David," obviously the corporate body of church leadership.

Christ's final promise is directed to the same personified body not merely to individuals: "To him who overcomes [the angel of the church of the Laodiceans] I will grant to sit with Me on My throne, as I also overcame, and sat down with My Father on His throne" (Revelation 3:21). This ultimate honor will be accorded to a generation, a body of God's people who will respond to His appeal, "Repent!"<sup>2</sup>

A probe into the meaning of repentance is not "negative." Rather, feeling satisfied with the status quo is the really negative attitude, because such spiritual *laissez faire* indefinitely postpones the finishing of the gospel commission. And it is a totally false idea to assume that a church that repents will not attract youth. That is the only atmosphere in our church that can attract and hold youth.

Many thousands in the church hunger and thirst for a clearer grasp of vital truth for these last days. They sense that the coming of the Lord has been long delayed and that we, not Heaven, are responsible. They realize that pinpointing the reason for repentance and exploring how to experience it is the most "positive" course we can pursue.

Repentance by "the body" does not deny or displace personal, individual repentance. Rather, it makes it effective. The daily ministry in the first apartment of the Levitical sanctuary took care of individuals' needs, but the annual Day of Atonement was concerned for a corporate cleansing for Israel as a congregation. All repentance is personal and individual. But no individual can ever be the "bride" of Christ, for as individuals God's people are all merely "guests" at the wedding. The corporate body of the last-day overcoming church will be the bride.

Something has delayed her getting "ready." It is a deeper layer of sin which, He says, "you ... do not know" (Revelation 3:17). It makes sense to realize that the repentance which that deeper sin requires must itself also go deeper. However disturbing, the Lord's call must be faced honestly.

Repentance is indeed both sorrow for sin and turning away from it. But repentance can be only superficial if our understanding of the sin itself is superficial. While we readily quote the text that says, "If we confess our sins, He [Christ] is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness" (1 John 1:9), we must remember the context of this promise. It does not encourage a superficial assurance that the tape recording of our sins is scrubbed by pressing a magic button. When we thoughtlessly assume that the Lord can forgive sins while we don't realize what our sins are, John is telling us how easily "we deceive ourselves" so that, "the truth is not in us." So long as Jesus' pathetic diagnosis, "you ... do not know," remains valid, so long do "we deceive ourselves." We cannot be truly cleansed from deep sin that we do not understandably "confess" (1 John 1:8, 10).

If a sin is unknown to us, does it cease to be a sin? One may smoke cigarettes for a lifetime not knowing they are harmful. Nevertheless, the damage is done. "Sin pays its wages—death," whether we know what our sins are or not. There is a larger issue than our own personal security—the honor and vindication of Christ. The Lord may not hold against us a sin that we do not know of, but that sin brings shame upon Him nonetheless, and hinders His work of final atonement.

The message to Laodicea is not child's play. "One like the Son of man" with "eyes like a flame of fire" and "His voice as the sound of many waters" is calling His people to the most profound experience of the ages. Failure to recognize His call creates confusion and

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<sup>2</sup> Confusion on this point has fueled the fanatical idea that individuals must leave Laodicea and return to Philadelphia. But this would set the clock back more than a century and put the final events into reverse gear. Nowhere does Christ call individuals to leave Laodicea; He calls on "the angel of the church" to repent. See APPENDIX B regarding the Philadelphia-Laodicea relationship.

apostasy, and is an eventual time-bomb of denominational self-destruction. He has sent word to us:

In every church in our land, there is needed confession, repentance, and reconversion. The disappointment of Christ is beyond description (*Review and Herald*, December 15, 1904).

His appeal to repent is the clearest evidence we have of His love, and it is our best hope! "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches," especially the last one!

## Chapter Five

### **The Lord's Most Serious Problem Of the Ages**

*The ultimate success of the plan of salvation depends upon its final hour.  
Never in 6000 years has the Lord had a greater problem to solve than now.*

Are we involved in a genuine crisis? The greatest crisis of the ages involved the crucifixion of Christ. But that crisis overshadows us today.

Human sin, which began in Eden, finally blossomed into that murder of the Son of God. Those who crucified Him the first time were forgiven, for Jesus prayed for them, "They do not know what they do" (Luke 23:34). Sincere as we are, could we repeat their sin, again not knowing what we do?

There are those who "crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame" (Hebrews 6:6). Is Laodicea's sin related to this? How deep is the sin for which "the angel of the church of the Laodiceans" is called upon to repent?

Laodicea shares something in common with Israel of old—an ignorance of our true state. The Lord says, "You ... do not know," the same as He prayed of them, "They do not know" The remnant church is pathetically unaware of her actual role as she appears on the stage of the universe. "You are . . . naked," Christ whispers to us, in alarm (Revelation 3:17). Could this be more serious than we have thought, more than mere shameful but innocent naivete? Could it stem from a deep heart alienation from the Lord Himself, something that makes us akin to the ancient Jews?

The idea of nakedness surfaces again in the parable of the wedding garment. The deluded guest who thought that dressing up was optional was not only naive; *he lacked respect for the host*. An alienation deeper than his conscious understanding poisoned his feelings toward his host (Matthew 22:11-13). Laodicea improperly dressed but proudly attending the party is not only naive; there is something else involved: disrespect for the Host. Only the "final atonement" can develop proper reverence for the Host and can bring a solution to the problem.

Seventh-day Adventists are friends of Jesus and so would not knowingly crucify Him "again." But being His friends doesn't necessarily guarantee that we will treat Him right, for He says that He was once "wounded in the house of My friends" (Zechariah 13:6).

Many statements from the Lord's messenger declare that the same enmity against Christ that characterized the ancient Jews has been manifested by leaders in our Seventh-



day Adventist history. Further, this "just-like-the-Jews" syndrome has been the root of our basic spiritual problem for most of a century.

It is easy to suppose that Laodicea, being lukewarm, is not very bad and not very good, so that our sin must be a mild one. We have often acted and spoken as though Heaven is quite proud of us. But there is a problem. Our spiritual understanding has not kept pace with the tremendous increase of scientific knowledge in the world. No one of us in this computer age would want to live in a cave and count on an abacus by candlelight. But spiritually speaking, Christ represents His last-day church as virtually poverty-stricken, content with spiritual resources far behind our time. We are a pathetic sight to Heaven. We shall someday look back on our era as the dark ages. In a time of exploding knowledge in technology, God's people have not broken through this spiritual barrier of "you ... do not know." The last unexplored continent is not Antarctica, but the inner depths of Laodicea's soul. The enmity buried there is what Christ says we don't know.

### **The Cross and the Pathology of Sin**

Modern science has discovered that harmful bacteria and viruses produce disease. "While pathology can often identify these tiny enemy organisms, our understanding of what sin is and how it proliferates has not kept pace with the world's knowledge of how disease works. Yet we are near the time when Christ's intercession as High Priest must end, when the virus of sin must be forever annihilated. If any alienation from God or enmity against Him survives beneath the surface of our hearts at that time, it will proliferate unchecked into total rebellion against God. Armageddon will be the result— full scale, uninhibited enmity against Christ without the restraint now imposed by the Holy Spirit. No buried virus of sin must survive the final crisis.

In essence, all sin is a re-crucifixion of Christ, and its final display will be Armageddon. No one can deny that sin has abounded in our *modern* age; knowledge of much more abounding grace is the solution.

The master inventor of all fiendish schemes wants to embarrass Christ. If Satan can perpetuate sin among God's people, he has his success made. This is his best way to sabotage Christ's kingdom. Let's face a reality: continued apathy now is sin. And as time goes on, it will be seen to be a re-crucifixion of Christ. The enemy cannot at present use physical force. His strategy has been to take advantage of our ignorance of what sin is and thus induce in us a spiritual paralysis. Our singular lukewarmness is an enchanted-ground lethargy on the borders of Heaven.

### **What is the Pathology of Lukewarmness?**

How do succeeding generations of Adventists get re-infected by it? How does it spread even to Third World churches? It must be caused by a sin virus. If so, what is the nature of that sin? Why haven't we found healing for it?

Peter's sermon at Pentecost unlocks our understanding. He shocked his listeners with the news that latent enmity against God had flared out in the crucifixion of their Messiah. The Holy Spirit used his sermon to press home to their hearts the conviction of how awful that previously unknown sin was. They cried out, "What shall we do?"

The apostle's answer was, "Repent" (Acts 2:22-38). And they responded. They received the Holy Spirit in a measure that has never since been equaled. This is because they came to realize that their sin was *of* significantly greater dimensions than they had supposed. That blessing of the former rain will be surpassed in a final reception of the Holy Spirit known as the latter rain. *As at Pentecost, the gift will depend on a full realization of our true guilt.*

The Lord has in reserve a means of motivation that will be fully effective. What happened at Pentecost fueled the early church with extraordinary spiritual energy that flowed naturally out of their unique repentance. No sin in all time was more horrendous than that which those people were guilty of—murdering the Son of God.

Sin has always been "enmity against God," but no one fully understood its dimensions until the Holy Spirit drove the truth home to the hearts of Peter's audience. The realization of their guilt came over them like a flood. Theirs was no petty seeking for a shelter from hell or for a reward in Heaven, nor was it a craven search to evade punishment. The cross of the ages was towering over them, and their human hearts responded honestly to its reality. No selfishness was involved.

A repentance like that of Pentecost is what Christ calls for from us today. It will come, like a lost vein of gold in the earth that must surface again in another place. Hazy, indistinct ideas of repentance can produce only hazy, indistinct devotion. Like medicine taken in quantity sufficient to produce a concentration in the blood stream, repentance must be comprehensive, full-range, in order for the Holy Spirit to do His fully effective work.

### **Why Laodicea's Repentance Must Now Be Different in Depth and Extent**

This full spectrum of repentance is included in "the everlasting gospel" of Revelation 14. But its clearest definition has been impossible until history reaches the last of the seven churches. The original word "repentance" means a looking back from the perspective of the end: *metanoia*, from *meta* ("after") and *no us* ("mind"). Thus, repentance can never be complete until the end of history. Like the great Day of Atonement, its full dimension must be a last-day experience. To that moment in time we have now come.

Unless our veiled eyes can see the depth of our sin as identical to that of Peter's congregation at Pentecost, only a veneer repentance can be possible, thus perpetuating the Lord's problem for further generations. It is not enough that sin be legally forgiven; it must also be blotted out.

Not only are we frustrated by the long delay; Christ Himself is deeply pained. We can turn off the horrifying nightly news and find relief in sleep; but the Lord can't do that. He can "neither slumber nor sleep" (Psalm 121:4). The agony of a suffering, terrorized world weighs heavily upon Him. He cannot take a vacation to some remote corner of His universe and forget it. In our weakness, we can feel a little for the agonies of starving, homeless, despairing people when we know about them, yet Jesus is infinitely more sensitive and compassionate than the best of us. In ancient times "in all their affliction He was afflicted" (Isaiah 63:9), and He is still the same today.

Those who think of the result of hastening or hindering the gospel think of it in relation to themselves and to the world. Few think of its relation to God. Few give thought to the suffering that sin has caused our Creator. All Heaven suffered in Christ's agony; but that suffering did not begin or end with His manifestation in humanity. The cross is a revelation to our dull senses of the pain that, from its very inception, sin has brought to the heart of God. Every departure from the right, every deed of cruelty, every failure of humanity to reach His ideal, brings grief to Him (*Education*, page 263).

Our Lord is not an impassive Buddha-like deity in a nirvana trance. Our prayers do not move Him to a pity that He would not otherwise feel. When we beg Him, "Please do something to help," He responds hopefully, "Why don't *you* do something?"

When the mind and heart of "the angel of the church" are truly at-one with Christ, the roadblock will be eliminated. Then He will employ His people effectively to do what He

wants done for the world. It is especially of Seventh-day Adventists that Ellen White said, "The disappointment of Christ is beyond description." How can we relieve that disappointment?

### **The Lord's Problem Has Become The Crisis of the Ages**

The Bible reveals God in a dimension unknown in the Qur'an, the Vedic Hindu, or Buddhist, scriptures. The world's pain is God's pain, only intensified. Think how a loving, sensitive father feels the pain of a wounded child; then multiply that over six billion times.

Revelation goes a step further and pictures Christ as an eager Bridegroom who longs for "the marriage of the Lamb" to come soon, but who is disappointed that His bride has not yet "made herself ready" (Revelation 19:7-9)- She has kept Him at arm's length all this while. This means that as yet she cannot be truly reconciled to Him. When she is at-one with Him in heart and mind, every church will be pulsating with the life of the Holy Spirit, overflowing with Christlike love. Each member will be spiritually alert, radiant with a miraculous unselfishness that transforms him/her into a unique revelation of Christ.

Some inspired statements declare that this full-fledged revival will never take in the "whole church," because there will always be tares among the wheat. But there are other equally inspired statements that say that "the whole church" is to be animated and pervaded by the Holy Spirit, overflowing with Christlike love. How can these apparent contradictions be harmonized?

God's purpose in His people will be gloriously fulfilled in "a revival of true godliness among us," "that the way of the Lord may be prepared," "a great movement—a work of revival—going forward in many places. Our people were moving into line, responding to God's call." "The spirit of prayer will actuate every believer and will banish from the church the spirit of discord and strife.... All will be in harmony with the mind of the Spirit." "In visions of the night, representations passed before me of a great reformatory movement among God's people . . . even as was manifested before the day of Pentecost.... The world seemed to be lightened with the heavenly influence.... There seemed to be a reformation such as we witnessed in 1844.... Covetous ones became separated from the company of believers" (compare *Testimonies*, vol. 9, pages 20-23, 46, 47, 126; vol. 8, pages 247-251; *Selected Messages*, Book One, pages 116, 117, 121-128).

The apparent contradictions are resolved by that last sentence. There is a pre-shaking and a post-shaking church. The post-shaken church will fulfill these prophecies.

This grand finale of the work of God's Spirit will be a work of extraordinary beauty and simplicity:

Those who wait for the Bridegroom's coming are to say to the people, "Behold your God." The last rays 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 (*Christ's Object Lessons*, pages 415, 416).

Committee actions, polished programs, high-pressure promotion, can never truly motivate. Truth must be the vehicle, reaching human hearts, for only truth, "the third angel's message in verity," can penetrate the secret recesses of the human soul.

## Chapter Six

# A First in Human History: A Day-of-Atonement Repentance

*The cleansing of the sanctuary since 1844 is a non-negotiable truth to Seventh-day Adventists, the foundation of our existence. It also has profound ethical significance.*

Why does an "antitypical" heavenly Day of Atonement involve a special experience for God's last-day people on earth? Has He arbitrarily withheld that unique blessing from previous generations? Would it be fair for Him to grant the last generation something He deliberately kept away from others in past ages?

No, but previous generations were not able to avail themselves of the full grace Heaven longed to bestow. Not God's unwillingness to give, but man's unreadiness to receive, has caused the long delay of thousands of years. History had to be allowed to run its course. In no other way could the human race, "Adam," learn.

An example is ancient Israel. The Lord was ready and willing at Mt. Sinai to grant them the same justification by faith which Abraham enjoyed when "he believed in the Lord" (Genesis 15:6), and the same precious experience that Paul's Letter to the Romans described. But their unbelief made it impossible at that time, and the law had to become their "schoolmaster" or "tutor" to lead them on a long detour of history, back to the place where Abraham was, that they "might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:24, KJV).

The prophetic word, "for two thousand three hundred days, then the sanctuary shall be cleansed" (Daniel 8:14), predicts that during the last era of human history, the faith of God's people will mature, making possible their full reception of Heaven's grace. The prophecy of Daniel comprehends their spiritual development "to the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

God withheld nothing from Adam that arbitrarily barred him from the company of the 144,000. Rather, his own spiritual immaturity made it impossible to appropriate the grace an infinite God would have granted even then. God could have cleansed the sanctuary anciently, if human spiritual development had made it possible. We must not limit God's infinite resources; the deficiency has been ours. Jesus calls every generation to repent, for "all have sinned." "The knowledge of sin" comes through "the law" (Romans 3:23, 20). The Holy Spirit imparts this wholesome knowledge of his guilt to "every man." Its "light" has passed no one by (John 1:9). But a final generation will receive the gift of repentance, a *metanoia*, an after-perception, a contrite view of the past as history finally reveals it. Then it will be said, "The marriage of the Lamb has come, and his wife has made herself ready"

### How Repentance Takes Place

King David's double crime of adultery and murder illustrates how the Holy Spirit convicts of sin. For the Holy Spirit to abandon him would have been the cruelest punishment possible. No, God loved him still. The Holy Spirit pricked him with sharp conviction. "Day and night Your hand was heavy upon me," David says. The Lord "broke" his "bones," metaphorically. Then, David adds, "I acknowledged my sin to You, and my iniquity I have not hidden. I said, I will confess my transgressions to the Lord, and You forgave the iniquity of my sin" (Psalm 51:3-5). This was genuine repentance.

One may never have heard the name of Christ, but he senses in his heart that he has sinned, and come short of the glory of God. There is an awareness, however dim, of a perfect

standard in the divine law as it is in Christ. The Holy Spirit penetrates human hearts with the conviction of "sin, and of righteousness" (John 16:8-10).

### **Guilt, Like Pain, Is a Signal That Something Is Wrong**

A wound in the body triggers pain messages to the brain. While a painkilling drug can superficially alleviate the discomfort, it provides no healing. Serious disease or death can follow an artificial suppression of symptoms. Thus, when the sinner rejects the pain of the Holy Spirit's merciful conviction of sin, spiritual sickness and death follow. Pain in the body prompts the sufferer to seek healing. African lepers, whose sense of pain is anesthetized, lose fingers at night, bitten by rats because they cannot feel. Of how much greater value to us is the Holy Spirit's painful conviction of sin.

The grateful sinner prays, "Thank You, Lord, for loving me so much as to convict me of my sin. I confess the full truth. You have provided a Substitute who bears my penalty in my stead, and His love motivates me to separate from the sin that has crucified Him." This miracle occurred in David's heart when he prayed, "I will declare my iniquity; I will be in anguish over my sin" (Psalm 38:18).

Such repentance reflects not only sorrow for sin and its results, but a genuine abhorrence of it. It produces an actual turning away from the sin. The law can never do this for anyone. This miracle comes only by grace. "The law brings about wrath," imparting only a terror of judgment, but when grace works repentance, "old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new" (Romans 4:15; 2 Corinthians 5:17). Sin, once loved, is now hated, and righteousness, once hated, is now loved. "The goodness of God leads you to repentance" (Romans 2:4).

Such repentance includes the actual "remission of sins," that is, sending them away (Luke 24:47). The New Testament word for forgiveness means a separation from sin, a deliverance from its power. True repentance thus actually makes it impossible for a believer in Christ to continue living in sin. The love of Christ supplies the grand motivation, a change in the life (2 Corinthians 5:15).

One finds a kind of joy in the experience:

The sadness that is used by God brings a change of heart that leads to salvation—and there is *no* regret in that! But sadness that is merely human causes death. See what God did with this sadness of yours: how earnest it has made you... Such indignation, such alarm, such feelings, such devotion (2 Corinthians 7:10, 11, TEV).

Peter manifested genuine repentance. We can identify with him, for he failed miserably, yet he accepted the precious gift of repentance which Judas refused. After basely denying his Lord with cursing, Peter "went out and wept bitterly" (Mark 14:71; Luke 22:62). His repentance never ceased. Always afterward tears glistened in his eyes as he thought of his sin contrasted against the Lord's kindness to him. But these were happy tears. The tempest of contrition always brings the rainbow of divine forgiveness. Even medical scientists recognize there is wholesome healing therapy in tears of contrition, for men as well as for women. We ruin our health and shorten our lives when we resist or suppress the tenderness, the melting influence of God's Spirit that tries to soften our hard hearts.

The Lord Himself who "so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" has prepared the way for His *gospel*. He has given humanity this capacity to feel the personal pain of conviction of sin. It is a clear evidence of His love!

But legalism or a perverted "gospel" short-circuits this work of the Holy Spirit in human hearts. As a consequence, millions are not able to experience the repentance that alone can

heal the hurt they know deep inside. But Scripture foretells a time when the gospel will be restored to its pristine purity and the earth will be "illuminated" with its glory (Revelation 18:1-4). It will be like restoring a broken electric connection. The circuit will be complete—the Holy Spirit's conviction of sin will be complemented by the pure gospel, and the current of Heaven's forgiveness will flow through every repentant soul.

### **This is Solid Happiness**

Far from being a negative experience, such repentance is the foundation of all true joy. As every credit must have a corresponding debit to balance the books, so the smiles and happiness of life, to be meaningful, must be founded on the tears of Another upon whom was laid "the chastisement for our peace" and with whose "stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

Our tears of repentance and sorrow for sin do not balance the books of life. Rather, our *appreciation* of what it cost Him to bear our griefs and carry our sorrows—this brings salvation within our reach.

The nearer we come to Jesus and the more clearly we discern the purity of His character, the more clearly shall we see the exceeding sinfulness of sin, and the less shall we feel like exalting ourselves. There will be a continual reaching out of the soul after God, a continual, earnest, heartbreaking confession of sin and humbling of the heart before Him (*Acts of the Apostles*, page 561).

At every advance step in Christian experience our repentance will deepen. It is to those whom the Lord has forgiven, to those whom He acknowledges as His people, that He says, "Then shall ye remember your own evil ways, and your doings that were not good, and shall loathe yourselves in your own sight." Ezekiel 36:31 (*Christ's Object Lessons*, pages 160, 161).

A repentance like this is beyond us to invent or to initiate; it must come as a gift from above. God has exalted Christ "to give repentance to Israel" (Acts 5:31). And to the Gentiles also He "granted . . . repentance to life" (chapter 11:18). Is He any less generous to us today? The capacity for such a change of mind and heart is a priceless treasure worth more than all the millions in Las Vegas. Even the will to repent is His gift, for without it we are "dead in trespasses and sins" (Ephesians 2:1).

Such an experience seems almost wholly out of place in this last decade of the 20th century. Can a sophisticated modern church ever receive it?

### **What Makes Repentance Possible?**

The Bible links "repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 20:21). Repentance is not a cold calculation of options and their consequences. It is not a selfish choice to seek an eternal reward or to flee the pains of hell. It is a heart experience that results from appreciating the sacrifice of Christ. It cannot be imposed by fear or terror, or even by hope of immortality. Only "the goodness of God leads you to repentance."

The ultimate source from which this superb gift flows is the truth of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. As faith is a heart appreciation of the love of God revealed there, so repentance becomes the appropriate exercise of that faith which the believing soul experiences. We follow where faith leads the way as illuminated by the cross—down on our knees. Peter's call to "repent, and let every one of you be baptized" followed the most convicting sermon on the cross that has ever been preached (Acts 2:16-38). The compelling response at

Pentecost was the fulfillment of Jesus' promise: "I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all ... to Myself" (John 12:32).

Why don't we see more of this precious gift? Is modern man too sophisticated to welcome it? No, human nature is not beyond redemption, even in these last days. Genuine repentance with "works befitting repentance" is rare only because that genuine preaching of the cross is rare (compare Acts 26:20; 2 Corinthians 5:14). Its essence is powerfully set forth in Isaac Watts' memorable words:

When I survey the wondrous cross  
On which the Prince of glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss  
And pour contempt on all my pride.

All through past ages since Pentecost, believing sinners have individually received the gift. Sleeping in the dust of the earth, they all await the "first resurrection." *Theirs has been one phase of repentance.* Without a preparation for His coming, on the part of His living people, Christ cannot come. Until then, those sleeping saints of all ages who personally repented are doomed to remain prisoners in their dusty graves. Thus the "remnant" must unlock this logjam of last-day events by a special repentance. Such an event—unique in history—is the reason for the Seventh-day Adventist Church's existence.

### **What is Different About Laodicea's Repentance?**

Laodicea is not innately worse than the other six churches. But since she is living in the last days which is the time of the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary, a never-before phase of our great High Priest's Day-of-Atonement ministry calls for a never-before kind of response. *This becomes another phase of repentance.*

While Christ performs His "final atonement" in the second apartment of the heavenly sanctuary, can we continue living as though He were still in the first? The gap between Laodicea's unique opportunities and her true state has widened so much that her pathetic condition has become the most difficult problem the Lord has ever had to deal with. And unless we walk carefully, we are in the greatest peril of the ages. Ellen White was given a glimpse of the significance of the transfer of Christ's ministry from the heavenly sanctuary's first apartment to the second:

Those who rose up with Jesus would send up their faith to Him in the holiest [apartment], and pray, "My Father, give us Thy Spirit." Then Jesus would breathe upon them the Holy Ghost. In that breath was light, power, and much love, joy, and peace.

I turned to look at the company who were still bowed before the throne [in the first apartment]; they did not know that Jesus had left it. Satan appeared to be by the throne, trying to carry on the work of God. I saw them look up to the throne, and pray, "Father, give us Thy Spirit." Satan would then breathe upon them an unholy influence; in it there was light and much power, but no sweet love, joy and peace. Satan's object was to keep them deceived, and to draw back and deceive God's children (*Early Writings*, pages 55, 56).

In a later statement, the author spoke of those who "have no knowledge of the way into the most holy [apartment,] and they can not be benefited by the intercession of Jesus there." We used to assume that "those" were Sunday-keepers; but now there are many within the remnant church who "have no [such] knowledge":

Like the Jews, who offered their useless sacrifices, they offer up their useless prayers to the apartment which Jesus has left; and Satan, pleased with the deception, assumes a religious character, and leads the minds of these professed Christians to himself, working with his power, his signs and lying wonders, to fasten them in his snare.... He also comes as an angel of light, and spreads his influence over the land by means of false reformations. The churches are elated, and consider that God is working marvelously for them, when it is the work of another spirit (*Ibid.*, page 261).

The experience of Laodicea will fit the potential of the heavenly Day of Atonement, because the message to Laodicea parallels this cleansing of the sanctuary. What does this mean in practical, understandable terms?

### **Repentance and the Cleansing of the Sanctuary**

The "daily" ministry in the sanctuary includes the forgiveness of sins, but the "yearly" goes further. The blotting out of sins takes place in the "times of refreshing," that is, the cleansing of the sanctuary (see Acts 3:19). The Day-of-Atonement ministry includes the blotting out of sins, and can occur only at the end of time, after the close of the 2300 years (see *The Great Controversy*, pages 421, 422, 483).

In these last days there is something Laodicea "does not know," some deeper level of guilt that has never been discerned. Here is where that deeper repentance takes place.

It will not suffice for us to say, "Let the heavenly computers do the work—our sins will be blotted out when the time comes without our knowing about it." There is no such thing as automatic, computerized blotting out of sins that takes place without our knowledge and participation. It is we who are to repent individually and understandably, not the heavenly computers. "The expulsion of sin is the act of the soul itself," not of heavenly computers (*The Desire of Ages*, page 466).

A little thought will make it clear that no sin can be "blotted out" unless we come to see it and confess it understandably. Our deeper level of sin and guilt must be realized if our Saviour's complete ministry for us is to be appreciated. Nothing short of this can be adequate repentance in the Day of Atonement.

Hence Laodicea's experience of repentance is unique in world history. All things are being held up for lack of it. Our plane is freighted with the precious cargo of the loud cry "good news" message to enlighten the earth. There is no time now for more delay—even to wait for persecution; when persecution comes, it may be too late.

Many inspired statements make clear the principle of a deeper layer of guilt beneath the surface. Here are a few examples:

The work of restoration can never be thorough unless the roots of evil are reached. Again and again the shoots have been clipped, while the root of bitterness has been left to spring up and defile many; but the very depth of the hidden evil must be reached, the moral senses must be judged, and judged again, in the light of the divine presence (*Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, page 1152).

The Laodicean message must be proclaimed with power; for now it is especially applicable.... Not to see our own deformity is not to see the beauty of Christ's character. When we are fully awake to our own sinfulness, we shall appreciate Christ.... Not to see the marked contrast between Christ and ourselves is not to know ourselves. He who does not abhor himself cannot understand the



meaning of redemption.... There are many who do not see themselves in the light of the law of God. They do not loathe selfishness; therefore they are selfish (*Review and Herald*, September 25, 1900).

The message to the Laodicean church reveals our condition as a people.... Ministers and church-members are in danger of allowing self to take the throne.... If they would see their defective, distorted characters as they are accurately reflected in the mirror of God's Word, they would be so alarmed that they would fall upon their faces before God in contrition of soul, and tear away the rags of their self-righteousness (*Ibid*, December 15, 1904).

The Holy Spirit will reveal faults and defects of character that ought to have been discerned and corrected.... The time is near when the inner life will be fully revealed. All will behold, as if reflected in a mirror, the working of the hidden springs of motive. The Lord would have you now examine your own life, and see how stands your record with Him (*Ibid*, November 10, 1896).

If we have defects of character of which we are not aware, He [the Lord] gives us discipline that will bring those defects to our knowledge, that we may overcome them.... Your circumstances have served to bring new defects in your character to your notice; but nothing is revealed but that which was in you (*Ibid*, August 6, 1889).

There is nothing "negative" in these quoted paragraphs. If one were sick with a fatal cancer, one would welcome as precious good news the surgeon's announcement that immediate surgery can remove the cancerous tissue and save one's life.

### **The Greatest Sin of All the Ages**

What brought ancient Israel's ruin? She refused to accept her Messiah's message, which exposed a deeper level of guilt than she had previously realized. The Jews of Christ's day were not by nature more evil than any other generation; it was simply theirs to act out to the full the same enmity against God that all the fallen sons and daughters of Adam have always had by nature. As our natural "carnal mind is enmity against God" (Romans 8:7), they simply demonstrated this fact visibly in the murder of their divine Visitor. Those who crucified the Saviour hold up a mirror wherein we can see ourselves.

Horatius Bonar learned this in a dream in which he seemed to be witnessing the crucifixion. In a frenzy of agony, as in a nightmare, he tried to remonstrate with the cruel soldiers who were driving spikes through Christ's hands and feet. He laid his hand on the shoulder of one to beg him to stop. When the murderer turned to look at him, Bonar recognized his own face.

Laodicea's repentance will go down to the deepest roots of this natural "enmity against God." This deeper phase of repentance is repenting of sins that we may not have personally committed, but which we would have committed if we had the opportunity. The root of all sin, its common denominator, is the crucifixion of Christ. A repentance for this sin is appropriate because the books of Heaven already record this sin written against our names; and the Holy Spirit will bring this presently unknown sin to our knowledge:

That prayer of Christ for His enemies embraced the world. It took in every sinner that had lived or should live.... Upon all rests the guilt of crucifying the Son of God (*The Desire of Ages*, page 745).

God's law reaches the feelings and motives, as well as the outward acts. It reveals the secrets of the heart, flashing light upon things before buried in darkness. God knows every thought, every purpose, every plan, every motive. The books of Heaven record the sins that would have been committed had there been opportunity. God will bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing... He reveals to man the defects that mar his life, and calls upon him to repent, and turn from sin (*Bible Commentary*, vol. 5, page 1085).

"Opportunity" has often come to others in the form of alluring, overmastering temptations through circumstances we ourselves may not have experienced. None of us can endure the full consciousness of what we would do if under sufficient pressure—terrorism, for example. (The enforcement of the "mark of the beast" will provide the ultimate "opportunity.") But our potential sin is already recorded in "the books of Heaven."

A Jewish concentration camp survivor of the Holocaust discovered this truth in an unusual way. Yehiel Dinur walked into the Nuremberg court in 1961, prepared to testify against Nazi butcher Adolf Eichmann. But when he saw Eichmann in his humbled status, Dinur suddenly began to cry, then fell to the floor. It was not hatred or fear that overcame him. He suddenly realized that Eichmann was not the superman that the inmates had feared; he was an ordinary man. Says Dinur: "I was afraid about myself. I saw that I am capable to do this. I am . . . exactly like he!" Mike Wallace of "60 Minutes" told the story on TV. He summed it up: "Eichmann is in all of us." Only the full work of the Holy Spirit can bring to us the full conviction of the reality of sin; but in these last days when sins must be "blotted out" as well as pardoned, this is His blessed work. No buried bacteria or virus of sin can be translated into God's eternal kingdom.

The Laodicean call to repentance is the essence of the message of Christ's righteousness. Whatever sins other people are guilty of, they obviously had the "opportunity" of committing them. Somehow the temptations were overmastering to them. The deeper insight the Holy Spirit brings to us is that we are by nature no better than they. When Scripture says that "all have sinned," it means, as the New English Bible translates it, "all alike have sinned" (compare Romans 3:23, KJV). Digging down to get the roots out, — this is now "present truth."

There is no way that we can appreciate the heights of Christ's glorious righteousness until we are willing to recognize the depths of our own sinfulness. For this reason, to see our own potential for sin is inexpressibly good news!

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*

What are the practical aspects of this ultimate disclosure of our true guilt, and of God's much more abounding grace that cleanses it?

Our search must continue.

## Chapter Seven

# Christ's Repentance for Sins He Never Committed

*How could Christ be baptized with John's "baptism of repentance" if He never had an experience of repentance? And how could a sinless Person experience repentance?*

Both the Bible and Ellen White's writings make it clear that Jesus Christ experienced repentance. But it seems almost preposterous to imagine how or why a sinless person could experience repentance.

This does not mean that He experienced sin, for never in thought, word, or deed did He yield to temptation. Peter says of Him, "Who committed no sin, nor was guile found in His mouth" (1 Peter 2:22).

But John the Baptist "baptized with a baptism of repentance" (Acts 19:4), and therefore must have baptized Jesus with the only baptism he knew. His baptism implied on the sinless Candidate's part, an experience of repentance. Otherwise, the baptism would have been a farce, and both John and Jesus would be guilty of hypocrisy. That is unthinkable.

How could Christ experience repentance if He had never sinned? We have always assumed that only evil people need to repent, or can repent. It is shocking to think that good people can repent, and incomprehensible how a perfect Person could repent.

Nevertheless, if Christ was "baptized with a baptism of repentance," clearly He did experience repentance. But the only kind a sinless person could experience is corporate repentance. Thus, Jesus' repentance is a model and example of the kind He expects of Laodicea. It has special meaning for us who live today because His Day-of-Atonement ministry will prepare a people to become like Him in character.

### Why Did John Baptize the Sinless Jesus?

Occasionally people such as the thief on the cross cannot for physical reasons be baptized. Was Jesus' baptism a legalistic provision, a deposit of merit to be drawn on for such emergencies in a substitutionary way? We have often thought so, and the theory goes like this: (a) One must be baptized in order to enter Paradise; (b) the poor thief nailed to a cross cannot be immersed; (c) Jesus' baptism thus helps him out like a credit transfer in a bank transaction; (d) the appropriate "deposit" is placed to the account of the unbaptized thief, and (e) thus he can be saved. Is this the purpose of Christ's baptism? Many have thought so, but such legalistic shenanigans are foreign to the spirit of the plan of salvation.

If any valid element lurks in this legalistic concept, the idea leaves us cold. Most people have had opportunity to be immersed, and believers have complied. It may be a comfort to those few who can't be baptized, but what then could Jesus' baptism mean to the vast proportion who can be?

Another theory has been that John baptized Jesus to demonstrate the proper physical method of administering the ordinance, a physical example by the Teacher. This too leaves us cold.

Jesus was sincere when He asked John to baptize Him. John was also sincere in refusing. But Jesus explained why He wanted to be baptized. He answered the prophet's objections, "Thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness" (Matthew 3:15).

Was Jesus suggesting that He and John should act out a play? The essence of "righteousness" is sincerity and genuineness. Our divine Example could never condone such a performance without the appropriate heart experience. Play-acting could never "fulfill all righteousness." For Christ to subject Himself to baptism without an experience appropriate

to the deed would have been to give an example of hypocrisy, the last thing Jesus wants from anyone! Never does He want anyone to experience the act of baptism without true repentance.

John the Baptist obviously had not understood the principle of corporate guilt and repentance. Once that truth is recognized, Jesus' baptism begins to make sense.

### **How Close Jesus Came to Us**

Jesus asked for baptism because He genuinely identified Himself with sinners. If Adam represents the entire human race, Jesus became the "last Adam," taking upon Himself the guilt of humanity's sin (see 1 Corinthians 15:45). Not that He sinned, but He felt how the guilty sinner feels. He put Himself fully in our place. He put His arms around us as He knelt down beside us, dripping wet on the banks of the Jordan, asking His Father to let Him be the Lamb of God. His submission to baptism indicates that "the Lord has laid on Him the iniquity of us all." His baptism therefore becomes an injection of healing repentance for sin into the body of humanity. Peter says that His identity with our sins was deep, not superficial, for He "bore our sins in His own body on the tree" (Isaiah 53:6; 1 Peter 2:24).

Christ did not bear our sins as a man carries a bag on his back. In His own "body" in His soul, in His nervous system, in His conscience, He bore the crushing weight of our guilt. So close did He come to us that He felt as if our sins were His own. His agony in Gethsemane and on Calvary was real.

Ellen White describes Christ's deep heartfelt repentance for us in these perceptive comments:

After Christ had taken the necessary steps in repentance, conversion, and faith in behalf of the human race, He went to John to be baptized of him in Jordan (*General Conference Bulletin*, 1901, page 36.)

John had heard of the sinless character and spotless purity of Christ... [He] could not understand why the only sinless one upon the earth should ask for an ordinance implying guilt, virtually confessing, by the symbol of baptism, pollution to be washed away. . . .

Christ came not confessing His own sins; but guilt was imputed to him as the sinner's substitute. He came not to repent on His own account; but in behalf of the sinner.... As their substitute, He takes upon Him their sins, numbering Himself with the transgressors, taking the steps the sinner is required to take; and doing the work the sinner must do (*Review and Herald*, January 21, 1873.)

There is profound truth here:

1. Though sinless, Christ did in His own soul experience repentance. Biblical support exists for these repeated statements.

2. His baptism shows that He knows how "every repenting sinner" feels. In our self-righteousness we cannot feel such sympathy with "every repenting sinner." That's a major reason why we win so few souls! Only a Perfect Person can experience a perfect and complete repentance such as that. But we can become partakers of the divine nature.

3. His taking "the steps the sinner is required to take" underscores His identity with us. We cannot in truth "behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world" without experiencing union with Him. Thus it is vital to "behold" Jesus. Lukewarm impenitence stems from either not seeing Him clearly or from rejecting Him. A closer look at "the Lamb of God" enables us to identify our deep sin that needs to be taken away.

Jesus in His ministry had extraordinary power to win human hearts. Why? In His pre-baptism "repentance, conversion, and faith in behalf of the human race," He learned "what was in man," for He "had no need that anyone should testify of man" (John 2:25). Thus He learned to speak as "no man ever spoke" (John 7:46). Only through these experiences could He break the spell of the world's enchantment and say to whom He would, "Follow Me," passing by no human as worthless, inspiring with hope the "roughest and most unpromising." "To such a one, discouraged, sick, tempted, fallen, Jesus would speak words of tenderest pity, words that were needed and could be understood" (*Ministry of Healing*, page 26.) We can begin to see that we ourselves can never know such drawing power with people until we partake of the kind of repentance that Christ experienced in our behalf.

Jesus' perfect compassion for every human soul stemmed from His perfect repentance in his/her behalf. He becomes the second Adam, partaking of the body, becoming one with us, accepting us without shame, "in all things ... made like His brethren" (Hebrews 2:17).

### **The Vision of a Caring Church**

In our role as a caring church we recognize our need of this genuine, unfailing Christ-like love. But we can preach about it a thousand years and never get beyond the window-dressing that psychological techniques can offer, except through the mature faith that will characterize Laodicea's final repentance. Such faith appreciates His character, seen more clearly through repentant eyes. His repentance represents a vital aspect of Immanuel's sinless character.

Through union with Him by faith we become part of the corporate body of humanity in Him. Is it not gross selfishness to want to appropriate Christ, yet refuse to appropriate His love for sinners? How can we receive Him and not receive that love which is "in Him"?

Truly, we have infinitely more reason to feel close to sinners than did our sinless Lord, for we ourselves are sinners; but our human pride holds us back from the warm empathy that Christ felt. How to experience this closeness is the purpose of true repentance.

The first step must be to recognize our corporate involvement with the sin of the whole world. Although we were not physically present at the events of Calvary two thousand years ago, "in Adam" the whole human race was there. So surely are we in Adam's sin.

Suppose that we had no Saviour. If any of us were left to develop to the full the evil latent in our own soul, if we were tempted to the ultimate as others have been tempted, we would surely duplicate their sin if given enough time and opportunity—that is, if there were no Saviour to save us from ourselves.

Suppose Hitler had lived as long as Methuselah. None of us dares to say, "I could never do what others have done!"

The apostle John says it is only when we confess a sin that we can experience Christ's "faithful" forgiveness and cleansing from it (1 John 1:9). But to confess a sin without sensing its reality becomes lip-service, perilously close to hypocrisy. Skin-deep confession and skin-deep repentance bring skin-deep love, skin-deep devotion. Jesus teaches the principle that we must realize we have been forgiven much before we can learn to "love much." Mary Magdalene was "forgiven . . . much" because she had been possessed by "seven devils" (see Luke 7:47; 8:2). Must we also go into devil possession, to "love much" after being forgiven? No, there is a better way: *realize that we would be possessed by seven devils if it were not for the grace of a Saviour!*

When Paul said, "I have been crucified with Christ" (Galatians 2:20), he meant that he identified himself with Christ. In the same way we identify ourselves with Christ's repentance in behalf of the human race. The footsteps of Christ are a path to corporate repentance.

In the light of Christ's cross the true dimensions of our sin begin to take shape out of the fog. Note how an inspired comment discloses our ultimate sin, for which we can "individually repent":

In the day of final judgment, every lost soul will understand the nature of his own rejection of truth. The cross will be presented, and its real bearing will be seen.... Before the vision of Calvary with its mysterious Victim, sinners will stand condemned.... Human apostasy will appear in its heinous character (*The Desire of Ages*, page 58).

We are still in a world where Jesus, the Son of God, was rejected and crucified.... Unless we individually repent toward . . . our Lord Jesus Christ, whom the world has rejected, we shall lie under the full condemnation that the action of choosing Barabbas instead of Christ merited. The whole world stands charged today with the deliberate rejection and murder of the Son of God.... Jews and Gentiles, kings, governors, ministers, priests, and people— all classes and sects who reveal the same spirit of envy, hatred, prejudice, and unbelief, manifested by those who put to death the Son of God—would act the same part, were the opportunity granted, as did the Jews and people of the time of Christ. They would be partakers of the same spirit that demanded the death of the Son of God (*Testimonies to Ministers*, page 38.)

Let us note:

1. Even "ministers" and church members share the guilt of crucifying Christ. Apart from the grace of God manifested through personal repentance, "every sinner" shares it.
2. Without this grace, "every sinner" would repeat the sin of Christ's murderers if given enough time and opportunity.
3. The sin of Calvary is an out-cropping of human alienation from God of which we are not aware, except by enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. At Calvary, all the masks came off.
4. In a real sense we were all at Calvary, not through preexistence or pre-incarnation, but through corporate identity "in Adam." Adam shares that guilt with us today.
5. The "righteous" in their own eyes, including "ministers" and "priests" of "all . . . sects," must of course include our own denomination, except for the grace of repentance.

The lesson of history is that the little acorn of our "carnal mind" needs only enough time and opportunity to grow into the full oak of the sin of Calvary. But he who receives "the mind of Christ" will necessarily have also the repentance of Christ, and the love of Christ. Therefore, the closer he comes to Christ, the more he will identify with every sinner on earth through corporate repentance.

The apostle Paul first articulated this brilliant idea. When we recognize it, we begin to feel that we too are "debtor both to Greeks, and to barbarians" (Romans 1:14). Since we become organically joined to Christ in faith, His concerns become ours, just as the concerns of one organ of the body become the concerns of all the other members of the body. Each believing member of the body longs to fulfill the intent of the Head, just as a violinist's fingers "long" to perform skillfully the intent of the violinist's mind. The miracle of miracles takes place in the heart and life of the one who believes the gospel: he begins to love as Christ loves!

### **Why Christ's Yoke is "Easy," And His Burden "Light"**

This experience resolves a thousand painful battles with temptation. Through corporate union with Christ, we genuinely feel we possess nothing by our own right. All our

struggles with materialism, love of the world, obsession with money and things, sensuality, self-indulgence, are transcended at last by the new compulsion of this liberating oneness of mind with Christ. Paul's "debtor" idea initiates this new love for others.

To make this very practical, we can ask: How did Christ love sinners? If He were to come into our churches today, we might be scandalized. He "recognized no distinction of nationality, or rank or creed." He would "break down every wall of partition." In His example

there is no caste, [but] a religion by which Jew and Gentile, free and bond, are linked in a common brotherhood, equal before God. No question of policy influenced His movements. He made no difference between neighbors and strangers, friends and enemies.... He passed by no human being as worthless, but sought to apply the healing remedy to every soul.... Every neglect or insult shown by men to their fellow men, only made Him more conscious of their need of His divine-human sympathy. He sought to inspire with hope the roughest and most unpromising (*Ministry of Healing*, pages 25, 26).

Repentance produces this practical love in human hearts. No longer need we be helpless to reach others whose evil deeds we do not understand, and pride ourselves on not having committed. The gap is bridged that insulates us from them.

Christ can exercise no healing ministry through those who are frozen in an unfeeling impenitence. Since He did no sin yet He knew repentance, we too can feel a genuine compassion in behalf of others whose sins we have not personally committed, because now we realize that our supposed goodness was only a lack of "opportunity" or a lack of temptation of equal intensity. Forthwith our work for them comes alive, and our efforts become effective.

Of others in trouble we genuinely feel, "There but for the grace of God am I." They will immediately sense the reality of our identity with them in the same way that sinners sensed Christ's identity with them. They will begin to hear in our voices the echo of His voice.

### **Why Only a Perfect Person Can Experience a Perfect Repentance**

The more Christlike a person is, the greater are his temptations, and the greater is his repentance. Thus Christ is the perfect Example of corporate repentance. Never before in world history and never since has a human offered to the Father such an offering of contrition for human sin. Because of His perfect innocence and sinlessness, only Christ could feel perfectly the weight of all human guilt.

Here is a beautiful expression of this truth:

Man had separated himself at such a distance from God by transgression of His law, that he could not humiliate himself before God proportionate to his grievous sin. The Son of God could fully understand the aggravating sins of the transgressor, and in His sinless character He alone could make an acceptable atonement for man in suffering the agonizing sense of His Father's displeasure. The sorrow and anguish of the Son of God for the sins of the world were proportionate to His divine excellence and purity, as well as to the magnitude of the offense (*Selected Messages*, Book One, pages 283, 284).

God is happy because He knows that He will have a people who are "without fault before the throne of God" (Revelation 14:5). Therefore, though sinners by nature, they will at last approach Christ's perfect example of repentance.

At every advance step in Christian experience our repentance will deepen. It is to those whom the Lord has forgiven, to those whom He acknowledges as His people, He says, "Then shall ye remember your own evil ways, and your doings that were not good, and shall loathe yourselves in your own sight" Ezekiel 36:31 (*Christ's Object Lessons*, pages 160, 161).

Ellen White recognized the far-reaching implications of such an experience:

As we see souls out of Christ, we are to put ourselves in their place, and in their behalf feel repentance before God, resting not until we bring them to repentance. If we do everything we can for them, and yet they do not repent, the sin lies at their door; but we are still to feel sorrow of heart because of their condition, showing them how to repent, and trying to lead them step by step to Jesus Christ (MS 92, 1901; *Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, page 960).

However faint a reflection, our repentance in behalf of others must be based on Christ's "repentance ... in behalf of the human race." It would be impossible for any of us to feel such concern and sorrow in behalf of others, had He not felt it first in our behalf.

If "we love because He first loved us," we repent because He first repented in our "behalf." He is our Teacher.

## *Chapter Eight*

# **How Christ Called the Ancient Jews to National Repentance**

*Jesus was disappointed with the way the Jews responded to His call to national repentance.  
He says He is also disappointed with the response of Seventh-day Adventists.*

Fresh from His own experience of corporate repentance and baptism "in behalf of the human race," Jesus demanded the same from the Jewish nation: "From that time Jesus began to preach and to say, Repent, for the kingdom of Heaven is at hand" (Matthew 4:17). And His disciples also "went out and preached that people should repent" (Mark 6:12).

Christ's greatest disappointment was that the nation did not respond. He upbraided "the cities in which most of His mighty works had been done, because they did not repent" (Matthew 11:20). He likened the nation to the unfruitful "fig tree planted in His vineyard.... For three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and find none" (see Luke 13:6-9).

The barren fig tree which Jesus cursed became a symbol representing not merely the mass of individual unrepentant Jews, but the corporate people which as a nation rejected Christ:

The cursing of the fig tree was an acted parable. That barren tree, flaunting its pretentious foliage in the very face of Christ, was a symbol of the Jewish nation. The Saviour desired to make plain to His disciples the cause and the certainty of Israel's doom (*Desire of Ages*, page 582).



Our Lord had sent out the twelve and afterward the seventy, proclaiming that the kingdom of God was at hand, and calling upon men to repent and believe the gospel.... This was the message borne to *the Jewish nation* after the crucifixion of Christ; but *the nation* that claimed to be God's peculiar people rejected the gospel brought to them in the power of the Holy Spirit (*Christ's Object Lessons*, page 308; emphasis added).

Note how personal sin had grown to become national sin. It was accomplished by the nation's leaders, and it bound the nation to corporate ruin:

When Christ came, presenting to the nation the claims of God, the priests and elders denied His right to interpose between them and the people.... They set themselves to turn the people against Him (*Christ's Object Lessons*, pages 304, 305).

### **How National Ruin Followed National Impenitence**

Only national repentance could have saved the Jewish nation from the impending ruin that their national sin invoked upon them:

For the rejection of Christ, with the results that followed, they were responsible. A *nation's* sin and a *nation's* ruin were due to the religious leaders (*Ibid.*, page 305, emphasis added).

Paul showed that Christ had come to offer salvation first of all to *the nation* that looked for the Messiah's coming as the consummation and glory of their national existence. But *that nation* had rejected Him who would have given them life, and had chosen another leader, whose reign would end in death. He endeavored to bring home to His hearers the fact that repentance alone could save the Jewish nation from impending ruin (*Acts of the Apostles*, page 247, emphasis added).

In Jesus' last public discourse He made a final appeal to these leaders at the Jerusalem headquarters to repent. Their refusal broke His heart. With tears in His voice, the Saviour predicted the impending national ruin: 'All these things will come upon this generation. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . .' (Matthew 23:13-37).

Christ certainly appealed to individuals to repent, for He said, "there will be joy in Heaven over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:7). But there is a distinct difference between national repentance and individual repentance. He also appealed to "this . . . evil generation," that is, the nation. "The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation, and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah" (Luke 11:32). The fate of a nation, not merely that of individuals, hung in the balance.

Like a lone flash of lightning on a dark night, this reference to Nineveh illustrates Jesus' idea. National repentance is so rare that few believe it can ever take place. He used Nineveh's history as an example to prove that what He called for was indeed possible. If a heathen nation can repent, He said in effect, surely the nation that claims to be God's chosen people can do the same!

As Jonah became a sign unto the Ninevites, so also the Son of Man will be to this generation.... The men of Nineveh will rise up in the judgment with this generation, and condemn it, for they repented at the preaching of Jonah; and indeed, a greater than Jonah is here (Luke 11:30, 32).

## The "How" of Heathen Nineveh's Repentance

If one picture is worth a thousand words, Nineveh's repentance vividly illustrates a national response to the call of God. A *nation* repented, not simply a scattered group of individuals. We find it easier to believe a "great fish" swallowed Jonah alive than to accept that a government and a nation can repent at the preaching of God's Word. "The people of Nineveh believed God, proclaimed a fast, and put on sackcloth, from the greatest to the least of them" (Jonah 3:5). There is no reason to doubt this sacred history.

This repentance began with "the greatest," and extended downward from the usual order in history to "the least of them." "Word came to the king of Nineveh; and he arose from his throne and laid aside his robe, covered himself with sackcloth and sat in ashes. And he caused it to be proclaimed and published throughout Nineveh by the decree of the king and his nobles" (Jonah 3:6,7).

It is true that this call to repent did not *originate* at the royal palace. But note that the government of Nineveh wholeheartedly *supported it*. The "city" repented from top to bottom. Fantastic! The repentance was both nationally "proclaimed and published," and individually received. The divine warning had proclaimed a national overthrow of Nineveh; the leadership led the people to repent—a national repentance.

Jesus' point was this: if this happened once in history, why couldn't it happen with the Jews also? The Jews could have achieved national repentance easily and practically. (And why can't it happen with us?) The high priest, Caiaphas, could have led out as well as did the king of Nineveh. Caiaphas needed only to accept the principle of the cross as Jesus taught it.

## How Caiaphas Could Have Led Israel to Repentance

Let's give Caiaphas the generous benefit of a doubt. At first he could have been sincerely uncertain how to relate to Jesus in the early days of His ministry. But by the time of Jesus' trial he could have taken a firm stand for right. He needed only to make a simple speech such as this to the Sanhedrin: "For a time I didn't understand the work of Jesus. You brethren have shared my misunderstanding. Something has happened among us that has been beyond us. But I have studied the Scriptures lately. I have seen that beneath His lowly outward guise, Jesus of Nazareth is indeed the true Messiah. He fulfills the prophetic details. And now, brethren, I humbly acknowledge Him as such, and I forthwith step down from my high position and shall be the first to install Him as Israel's true High Priest."

A gasp of surprise would have rippled through the Sanhedrin chambers if Caiaphas had said these words. Today he would be honored all over the world as the noblest leader of God's people in all history. He could have done what Moses would have loved to do. (In fact, Moses refused Pharaoh's throne!) The Jews, many of them, would doubtless have followed Caiaphas' lead. We have already seen how the religious leaders fastened national guilt upon the people. It follows that the same leaders could as easily have led them into national repentance. Christ could have died in some other way than murder by His own people, and Jerusalem could today be the "joy of the whole earth" rather than its sorest plague spot.

If the remnant church ultimately chooses to follow ancient Israel in impenitence, Christ will suffer at her hands the most appalling humiliation He has ever endured. He will be crucified afresh, wounded anew "in the house of [His] friends" (Zechariah 13:6). Humanity's final indignity would be heaped upon His sacrifice.

But God's Word must proclaim good news. Christ did not sacrifice Himself to be defeated. The antitypical Day of Atonement resolves all doubt. In the light of the cross we see the assurance that the church will at last overcome this tragic ancient pattern of

unbelief The church is His prized possession, "which He has purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). In the end His people will not deprive Him of His reward.

For once in history, history will not repeat itself. His church will fully vindicate Christ. He will see that the infinite price He paid for their redemption was worthwhile. An infinite sacrifice will fully redeem and heal an infinite measure of human sin.

Though He was "a greater" than Jonah and "a greater than Solomon," Christ did not appear in the glorious garb and pomp of Solomon. Nor did He "cause His voice to be heard in the street" as did Jonah (compare Matthew 12:42; Isaiah 42:2). Yet the Jewish leaders had evidence enough of His authority. The quality of His solemn call to repentance convinced them of what their pride refused to confess. No other "sign" would be given that "evil and adulterous generation." Once she refused to acknowledge Heaven's last call to repentance, nothing could stay Israel's frightful doom.

And the sure evidence of the Holy Spirit's work today resides in the True Witness' solemn call to us to repent.

### **The Ingathering of Repentant Jews**

There remains a luminous hope for ancient Israel's literal descendants in our day:

Hardening in part has happened to Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved.... For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.... Through the mercy shown you they also may obtain mercy (Romans 11:25-31).

Note that the fulfillment of the prophecy hinges on a repentant Christian church. In the days before us we shall see some surprising developments among repentant Jews:

When this gospel shall be presented in its fulness to the Jews, many will accept Christ as the Messiah.... In the closing proclamation of the gospel, when special work is to be done for classes of people hitherto neglected, God expects His messengers to take particular interest in the Jewish people whom they find in all parts of the earth.... This will be to many of the Jews as the dawn of a new creation, the resurrection of the soul.... They will recognize Christ as the Saviour of the world. Many will by faith receive Christ as their Redeemer.... The God of Israel will bring this to pass in our day. His arm is not shortened that it cannot save. As His servants labor in faith for those who have long been neglected and despised, His salvation will be revealed (*Acts of the Apostles*, pages 380, 381).

How can we call the Jews to such repentance, unless we experience it ourselves? God's great heart of pity is moved on behalf of these suffering people, and a great blessing awaits them when we are prepared to be the agents to bring it:

Notwithstanding the awful doom pronounced upon the Jews as a nation at the time of their rejection of Jesus of Nazareth, there have lived from age to age many noble, God-fearing Jewish men and women who have suffered in silence. God has comforted their hearts in affliction and has beheld with pity their terrible situation. He has heard the agonizing prayers of those who have sought Him with all the heart for a right understanding of His word (*Ibid.*, pages 379, 380).

One's heart beats a little faster to read those words, so pregnant with hope and wonder. What joy it will be to witness the fulfillment of our beloved Paul's bright visions of future

restoration of the true Israel! Millions of Christians look to literal Israel in Palestine as the fulfillment. However, the servant of the Lord, in harmony with Paul's concept of justification by faith, foresaw the genuine fulfillment to be the repentance of many individual Jews who will learn from the remnant church the principle of corporate guilt and repentance.

Could it happen in our time?

Yes, if we really want it. The Jews will be our pupils, to learn from us what they didn't learn two thousand years ago—how to repent.

## *Chapter Nine*

# **How the Ancient Jewish Nation Sealed Their Doom**

*The A-to-Z story of their rebellion is frightening. Scripture warns us that we stand poised on the brink of a similar disaster.*

Could Jesus accuse people of a crime when they were innocent? If someone accused me for example of starting World War I, I would respond that this was unreasonable. I wasn't even born when it started! Yet Jesus accused the Jewish leaders of His day of guilt for a crime committed before any of them were born. His charge against them sounds unreasonable.

The story is in Matthew 23. Jesus has just upbraided the scribes and Pharisees with a series of "woes" accompanied by vivid flashes of irony and indignation. He concludes by springing on them this charge of murdering a certain Zechariah: "That on you may come all the righteous blood shed on the earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, son of Barachiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar" (verse 35).

For years I thought this Zechariah was a victim whom Christ's hearers had personally murdered in the temple during their lifetime, not more than 30 or 40 years previous.

### **Human Guilt from A to Z**

I was shocked to discover that this man was murdered some 800 years earlier. (2 Chronicles 24:20, 21 records the story). Why did Jesus charge this crime on the Jews of *His* day?

He was not unfair. When we see the principle of corporate guilt, the picture becomes clear. In rejecting Him, the Jewish leaders acted out all human guilt from A to Z (Abel to Zechariah), even though they may not yet have personally committed a single *act* of murder. They were one in spirit with their fathers who had actually shed the blood of the innocent Zechariah in the temple. In other words, they would do it again, and they did do it—to Jesus.

By refusing the call to repentance which the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed, they agreed to assume the guilt of all murders of innocent victims ever since the days of Abel. One who could not err fastened the entire load on them.

Suppose the Jewish leaders had repented? If so, they would have repented of "the blood of all the prophets, which was shed from the foundation of the world" (Luke 11:50). And thus they would not have gone on to crucify Christ.

To understand Jesus' thinking, we need to review the Hebrew idea of corporate personality. The church is the "Isaac" of faith, Abraham's true descendant, "one body" with him and with all true believers of all ages. To Jewish and Gentile believers alike, Paul says Abraham is "our father" (Romans 4:1-13). Even to the Gentile believers he says, "Our fathers were . . . baptized into Moses." "We [are] all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks" (1 Corinthians 10:1, 2; 12:13). We "all" means past generations and the present generation.

Thus Christ's body comprises all who have ever believed in Him from Adam down to the last remnant who welcome Him at His return. All are one individual in the pattern of Paul's thinking. Even a child can see this principle. Although it is his hand that steals from the cookie jar, when mother learns what happened, it's his bottom that gets spanked. To the child this is perfectly fair.

### **The Old Testament Makes It Clear**

1. Hosea depicts Israel's many generations as one individual progressing through youth to adulthood. He personifies Israel as a girl betrothed to the Lord. Israel "shall sing ... as in the days of her youth, as in the day when she came up from the land of Egypt" (Hosea 11:1; 2:15).

2. Ezekiel defines Jerusalem's history as the biography of one individual:

Thus says the Lord God to Jerusalem: "Your birth and your nativity are from the land of Canaan; your father was an Amorite, and your mother a Hittite... When I passed by you again and looked upon you, indeed your time was the time of love... You were exceedingly beautiful, and succeeded to royalty" (Ezekiel 16:3-13).

Generations of Israelites came and went, but her corporate personal identity remained. The nation carried the guilt of "youth" into adulthood, as an adult remains guilty of a wrong committed when he was a youth—even though physiologists say that time has replaced every physical cell in his body. One's moral personal identity remains regardless of the molecular composition of the body.

3. Moses taught this same principle. He addressed his generation as the "you" who should witness the captivity to Babylon nearly a thousand years later (see Leviticus 26:3-40). He also called on succeeding generations to recognize their corporate guilt with "their fathers":

If they shall confess their iniquity and the iniquity of their fathers, which they trespassed against me, and that they also have walked contrary to me; and that I also have walked contrary to them, and have brought them into the land of their enemies; if then their uncircumcised hearts be humbled, and they then accept the punishment of their iniquity...I will for their sakes remember the covenant of their ancestors, whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt (Leviticus 26:40-45).

4. Succeeding generations sometimes recognized this principle. King Josiah confessed that "great is the wrath of the Lord that is aroused against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us" (2 Kings 22:13). He said nothing about the guilt of his contemporaries, so clearly did he see his own generation's as the guilt of previous generations.

5. Ezra lumps together the guilt of his generation with that of their fathers: "Since the days of our fathers to this day we have been very guilty, and for our iniquities we, our kings,

and our priests, have been delivered into the hand of the kings of the lands" (Ezra 9:7). "Our kings" were those of previous generations, for there was no living king in Ezra's day.<sup>1</sup>

6. The David-Christ relationship is striking. David's Psalms express so perfectly what Christ later experienced that the Saviour used David's words to express the feelings of His own broken heart: "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Psalm 22:1; Matthew 27:46). Christ is the Word "made flesh." Nowhere does the perfect corporate identity of a "member" with the "Head" appear more clearly than in this David-Christ relationship. Christ knows Himself to be the "son of David." He has feasted on David's words and lived David's experiences. The perfect picture He sees of Himself in the Old Testament in the experience and words of the prophets, He lives out in His own flesh through faith.

7. This idea of identity reaches a zenith in the Song of Solomon, the love story of the ages. Christ loves a "woman," even His church. Israel, the foolish "child" called out of Egypt, the fickle girl in her youthful "time of love," the faithless woman in the kingdom days, "grieved and forsaken" in the Captivity, at last becomes the chastened and mature bride of Christ. At last, through corporate repentance she is prepared to become a mate to Him.

### **Would You Have Done Better?**

Let us picture ourselves in the crowd that gathered before Pilate that fateful Friday morning. The strange Prisoner stands bound. It is popular to join in condemning Him. Not a voice is raised in His defense.

Suppose you are connected with Pilate's government, or are in the employ of Caiaphas, the High Priest. You support your family with your wages. Would you have the courage to stand up alone and say, "We are making a terrible mistake here! This man is not guilty of these charges. He is what He claims—He is the divine Son of God! I appeal to you, Pilate and Caiaphas, accept this Man as the Messiah!"

Suppose your own close circle of friends has already joined the mockery and abuse of Jesus. Would you (or I) have the nerve to face them alone and rebuke them for what they do?

Realizing how easily a defense of Jesus might put you on the cross too, would you (or I) dare to speak out? Surely the answer is obvious. We dare not say that the church as a world body cannot know this repentance, lest when we survey the wondrous cross on which the Prince of glory died, we pour contempt on His loving sacrifice by implying that it was in vain.

### **Pentecost: Israel's History Not Totally in Vain**

Jesus' appeal to the Jews failed to move them. Yet a glorious demonstration of corporate repentance occurred at Pentecost. His calls at last bore fruit.

The three thousand converted that day probably did not all personally shout "Crucify Him!" at Christ's trial, or personally mock Him as He hung on the cross. Yet they recognized that they shared the guilt of those who did.

But the Jewish leaders stubbornly refused to do so: "Did we not strictly command you not to teach in this name? . . . You . . . intend to bring this Man's blood on us!" (Acts 5:28). In no way would they accept corporate guilt! (We Seventh-day Adventists have also denied ours, for decades.) Thus the Jews denied their only hope of salvation.

Pentecost has inspired God's people for nearly 2000 years. What made those grand results possible? The people believed the portrayal of their corporate guilt and frankly confessed their part in the greatest sin of all ages, which their leaders had refused to repent

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<sup>1</sup> See APPENDIX C for a discussion of Ezekiel 18 and corporate guilt.

of. Pentecost was an example of laity rising above the spiritual standards of their leaders. The final outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the latter rain will be an extension of the Pentecost experience.

A leadership reaction against Pentecost occurred a few months later. The Sanhedrin refused to accept Stephen's portrayal of corporate guilt through their national history: "You always resist the Holy Spirit; as your fathers did, so do you. Which of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who foretold the coming of the Just One, of whom you now have become the betrayers and murderers" (Acts 7:51, 52). They "stopped their ears, and ran at him with one accord; and they cast him out of the city and stoned him" (verses 57, 58).

Do we see the pattern in this? It began with Cain. Generation after generation refused to see their corporate guilt. Finally, impenitent Israel demonstrated to the world for all time to come the tragic end that follows national impenitence. "All these things happened unto them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, on whom the ends of the ages have come" (1 Corinthians 10:11).

But in that tragic hour when Israel sealed her doom by murdering Stephen, a truth began to work itself out in one honest human heart. It would lead at last to correction of the sin of Israel. The "witnesses laid down their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul." This young man's disturbed conscience thought through the great idea of a worldwide "body of Christ" that would eventually exhibit in full and final display the blessings of repentance which the Jews refused.

## *Chapter Ten*

### **The Urgency of Christ's Call to Repent**

*After watching nearly 150 years of His patient waiting, we may be tempted to think that Christ is a divine Wimp. But He is not playing games with us. He means business.*

The denomination known as Seventh-day Adventists is recognized in the writings of Ellen White as the prophetic "remnant" church. Further, since our beginnings our pioneers have believed it to be the fulfillment of the Revelation prophecy. If this is true, we have an authentic denominational identity. If it is not true, we have no true reason to exist:

In a special sense Seventh-day Adventists have been set in the world as watchmen and light bearers. To them has been entrusted the last warning for a perishing world. . . . They have been given a work of the most solemn import—the proclamation of the first, second, and third angels' messages.

The most solemn truths ever entrusted to mortals have been given to us to proclaim to the world. The proclamation of these truths is to be our work. The world is to be warned and God's people are to be true to the trust committed to them (*Testimonies*, vol. 9, page 19. See *Testimonies*, vol. 1, pages 186, 187; *Selected Messages*, Book One, pages 91-93; *Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, pages 959, 960, 961.).

Doubters on many sides are now seriously challenging our prophetic destiny, contending that the organized church has failed so badly that it has ceased to be the true prophetic remnant church. The source of this separationist mentality is a famine for the Good News truths of the 1888 message. The 1888 Good News ideas are like essential vitamins to a human body; their absence invites disease.

There has been a failure to comprehend the grand dimensions of God's grace, one dimension of which is the 1888 idea of justification by faith. It has not only been misunderstood, but denied. A legalistic vacuum has been created, into which rush a multitude of confusing and discouraging heresies. Through many decades of suppressing the "most precious message" we have developed a rigid, often harsh and uncharitable spirit of egocentric concern. The supreme concern is our own security, the salvation of our own little souls. Such religious fear brings out the worst in human nature. A better motivation is concern for Christ Himself. The presence in the church of "angry saints" must be a keen embarrassment to Him. While righteous indignation is valid, rude and ugly anger is out of place in the remnant church. The lack of Christian charity and common courtesy in some of the shrill voices in the church is phenomenal. It's a mistake to assume that Elijah was not a decent, Christian gentleman. Rebukes are never sanctified unless there are tears in the voice and in the pen. For decades "we" have systematically deprived our people of the much more abounding grace of that heartwarming 1888 message. The old adage says, it's hungry animals that fight.

### **The Secret Source of Separationist Poison**

It's serious not to understand the true nature of *agape*. Critics who have given up hope cannot see how God's love could possibly be loyal to a faulty, erring church. They assume that divine love is like human love—conditioned by the value or goodness of its object and dependent on it. (We fall in love with someone beautiful. We cannot comprehend falling in love with someone ugly.) So they look at the enfeebled and defective condition of the church and wonder how God's love for it can be permanent. "The church has failed," they say, "therefore, God's patient love must cease."

Divine love (*agape*) being free and independent, it *creates* goodness and value in its object. It is this creative quality which guarantees the success of the message to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans.

Off-shoot enthusiasts see such continued patient love as evidence that makes Christ to be a heavenly Wimp. They misconstrue *agape*, thinking it is too soft, not realizing that it is also hard as steel. They do not understand its power, how it is a love that is sovereign and independent, thus free to love the unlovely. It will transform a lukewarm church into a repentant one. It can succeed at last in converting honest souls in both liberal and arch-conservative camps, and bring disparate brethren into heart unity.

A separationist mind-set does not see that the honor and vindication of Christ Himself are intimately involved in the repentance of the denominated church. They see the sins of the church as unforgivable or at least irreversible, and therefore they do not believe that denominational repentance is possible. Leadership on the other hand often exacerbate the problem, maintaining that "all is well" and denominational repentance is unnecessary. Some sincere people who are ignorant of the message of Christ's righteousness are moved by what valid criticism is patently implicit in harsh messages of supposed "straight testimony," and they separate from the fellowship of the organized church.

This is unwise; it is unnecessary, and it is wrong. Christ never calls us to leave the church; He calls us to repent within the church, and to "sigh and cry" positively and effectively instead of negatively. An inspired voice emphatically assures us of ultimate denominational repentance. This is implicit in statements like these:



I am instructed to say to Seventh-day Adventists the world over, God has called us as a people to be a peculiar treasure unto Himself. He has appointed that His church on earth shall stand perfectly united in the Spirit and counsel of the Lord of hosts to the end of time (Letter 54, 1908; *Selected Messages*, Book Two, page 397).

Trust to God's guardianship. His church is to be taught. Enfeebled and defective though it is, it is the object of His supreme regard (Letter 279, 1904; *Ibid.*, page 396).

While there have been fierce contentions in the effort to maintain our distinctive character, yet we have as Bible Christians ever been on gaining ground (Letter 170, 1907; pages 396, 397).

The evidence we have had for the past fifty years [now 140] of the presence of the Spirit of God with us as a people, will stand the test of those who are now arraying themselves on the side of the enemy and bracing themselves against the message of God (Letter 356, 1907; page 397).

The church may appear as about to fall, but it does not fall. It remains, while the sinners in Zion will be sifted out—the chaff separated from the precious wheat. This is a terrible ordeal, but nevertheless it must take place (*Ibid.*, page 380).

I am encouraged and blessed as I realize that the God of Israel is still guiding His people, and that He will continue to be with them, even to the end.

I am instructed to say to our ministering brethren, Let the messages that come from your lips be charged with the power of the Spirit of God.... It is fully time that we gave to the world a demonstration of the power of God in our own lives and in our ministry (*Ibid.*, pages 406, 407).

Christ's message to Laodicea, in fact His very character of *agape*, is on trial before the heavenly universe. Will it be effective? Or will century after century go by with it never accomplishing the great work it calls for?

### **Certain Truths Stand Out**

1. It is clear that the Lord's greatest concern is for the human leadership of His church. "God's ministers are symbolized by the seven stars.... Christ's ministers are the spiritual guardians of the people entrusted to their care" (*Gospel Workers*, pages 13, 14). "These things, says He who holds the seven stars in His right hand.' These words are spoken to the teachers in the church—those entrusted by God with weighty responsibilities" (*Acts of the Apostles*, page 586). They are "those whom God has appointed to bear the responsibilities of leadership" in the church, "those in the offices that God has appointed for the leadership of His people" (*Ibid.*, page 164). If they refuse Christ's special call to repent, church organization must eventually disintegrate. But leadership *can* respond to Christ's call, and Revelation indicates that before the end they *will*.

2. Christ respects church organization. He intends that the "angel of the church" shall repent first, and then minister the experience to the worldwide church.<sup>1</sup> When the leadership of the church "in a great measure" rejected the 1888 message (*Selected Messages*,

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<sup>1</sup> Suppose the leadership fails, or rejects the Lord's appeal? Israel's history demonstrates that "the people" can intervene, demand and lead out in repentance; see Jeremiah 26.

Book One, pages 234, 235), He did not disregard them; He permitted their unbelief to arrest the finishing of His work for at least a century. Indeed, one might assume that if this unbelief persists for century after century, the Lord will indeed be a Wimp and be powerless in that He permits an unrepentant "angel of the church" to continue to frustrate His purpose. The idea is that if we will not keep step with the Lord, He will forever be frustrated and be forced to keep step with us.

3. However, we have an encouraging promise to lay hold of. *The time will come when the Lord will override impenitent leadership.* In 1885, three years before "the beginning" of the 1888 loud-cry message, Ellen White wrote to the president of the General Conference, a man who later chose to reject that "most precious message" when it came:

Unless those who can help in \_\_ are aroused to a sense of their duty, they will not recognize the work of God when the loud cry of the third angel shall be heard. When light goes forth to lighten the earth, instead of coming up to the help of the Lord, they will want to bind about His work to meet their narrow ideas. Let me tell you that the Lord will work in this last work in a manner very much out of the common order of things, and in a way that will be contrary to any human planning. There will be those among us who will always want to control the work of God, to dictate even what movements shall be made when the work goes forward under the direction of the angel who joins the third angel in the message to be given to the world. God will use ways and means *by which it will be seen that He is taking the reins in His own hands.* The workers will be surprised by the simple means that He will use to bring about and perfect His work of righteousness (Letter, October 1, 1885 to G. I. Butler; *Testimonies to Ministers*, page 300; emphasis supplied).

No one knows precisely how the Lord will take "the reins in His own hands." Although His love is infinite, His patience is not. His love for a lost world will prove greater than His patient indulgence of continued Seventh-day Adventist lukewarmness. Christ died for *the world.* There will come a time when He can no longer tolerate persistent, willful impenitence. He is quite capable of a righteous indignation. When the time comes for it to blaze forth, "Who is able to stand?"

When Christ's appeal for repentance is appreciated by "the angel of the church," contrition and reconciliation with Him will be communicated to the worldwide body far more quickly than we think possible. Hearts will be humbled, and at last a people will be prepared for proclaiming the loud-cry message to the world for whom Christ died. There is no reason why this vast task cannot be accomplished within our lifetime.

### **Will Christ Reject Laodicea?**

"The Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son" (John 5:22). In turn, Christ says of the one who will not believe in Him, "I do not judge him" (John 12:47). The only people therefore whom He will "judge" will be those whom He vindicates. The name "Laodicea" actually means "vindicating the people," God's people.

The message recognizes the church as Christ's one object of supreme regard. His final appeal implies that He has hope of success, that He fully expects His church to respond, else He would not waste His divine effort. His call expresses confidence in *agape* as a constraining power.

Further, the time lapse of over a century indicates how His patience and long-suffering demonstrate a purpose to succeed. He could not bestow such care upon an object which He intends ultimately to abandon. Thus the message to Laodicea is full of hope. The word "Laodicea" is not a synonym for failure. What's wrong with Laodicea is not her name but

her lukewarmness, her blindness, her wretchedness, not her identity as the last of the seven churches.

True, some individuals will never repent. Of them we read,

The figure of spewing out of His mouth means that He cannot offer up your prayers or your expressions of love to God. He cannot endorse your teaching of His word or your spiritual work in anywise. He cannot present your religious exercises with the request that grace be given you (*Testimonies*, vol. 6, page 408).

For some, perhaps for many, this personal rejection may have already taken place in our time. Leaders who have rejected Christ's appeal may continue to hold high office and deliver milque-toast messages:

The glory of the Lord had departed from Israel; although many still continued the forms of religion, His power and presence were lacking.... Peace and safety is the cry from men who will never again lift up their voice like a trumpet to show God's people their transgressions, and the house of Jacob their sins. These dumb dogs, that would not bark, are the ones who feel the vengeance of an offended God (*Testimonies*, vol. 5, pages 210, 211; 1882).

God has promised that where the shepherds are not true He will take charge of the flock Himself. God has never made the flock wholly dependent upon human instrumentalities. But the days of purification of the church are hastening on apace. God will have a people pure and true.... Those who have proved themselves unfaithful will not then be entrusted with the flock (*Testimonies*, vol. 5, page 80).

There is alarming evidence that in one sense the Lord did later "spew out" those who initially rejected the beginning of the loud-cry message in the 1888 era:

If such men as Elder Smith, Elder Van Horn, and Elder Butler shall stand aloof, not blending with the elements God sees essential to carry forward the work in these perilous times, they will be left behind.... These brethren ... will meet with eternal loss; for though they should repent and be saved at last, they can never regain that which they have lost through their wrong course of action (Letter, January 9, 1893; *1888 Materials*, page 1128).

The conference at Minneapolis was the golden opportunity for all present to humble the heart before God and to welcome Jesus as the great Instructor, but the stand taken by some at that meeting proved their ruin. They have never seen clearly since, and they never will, for they persistently cherish the spirit that prevailed there, a wicked, criticizing, denunciatory spirit (*Ibid.*, pages 1125, 1126).

Please note: in these solemn statements, Ellen White does not say that these dear brethren will be lost at last. *She says they would never recover the message or the experience which they rejected.*

History demonstrates that this is true. Even though the leading brethren whom she names did eventually confess their error, they never recovered the message itself and they never knew the joy of proclaiming it. Their books, sermons, and articles reside in the archives for inspection—the essential elements that made the 1888 message the "beginning" of the loud cry are absent therein. In *By Faith Alone*, Norval E. Pease recognizes

that when the nineteenth century became the twentieth, none of those who initially rejected the message were proclaiming it (see page 164).

*In this sense*, these brethren met with "eternal loss." *In that special sense* that Ellen White described in the *Testimonies*, vol. 6, page 408 statement, they were "spewed" out of the mouth of the Lord as leaders in the church, even though they continued to occupy high offices until their deaths.

What a lesson for us! Christ's call to "the angel of the church" is not to be taken lightly. He is not playing games or trifling with us. He means business. What a pity for one to go on arrogantly as a leader, a pastor, a church officer, an elder, when Christ has nothing to do with him! But Christ's words do not predict a complete corporate failure of Laodicea.

### **The Last Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan**

Offshoots have occasionally arisen on the assumption that Christ has already rejected the entire leadership of His church. These grow out of a misunderstanding of His call to repent. It is assumed that (a) the call to repent is for *individual* repentance; (b) it has been understood; and (c) it has been rejected. On the other hand, Scripture indicates that (a) the call is to *corporate* and *denominational* repentance; (b) history demonstrates that it has not been fully understood, and (c) it has, therefore, not been rejected, at least not finally and intelligently.

If it should eventually be true that Christ's call is rejected by His body, then the church would indeed be doomed. But that great "if" is not true. It would require the failure of the Laodicean message and the final defeat of the Lord Jesus as faithful Divine Lover.

Everyone who is willing to concede such a defeat for Christ stands on the side of the enemy, for Satan is determined that such a defeat must take place. Even the nagging doubt that expresses the "if" is born of a sinful unbelief which is disloyal to Christ.

Satan constantly assailed the Son of God with barbed "ifs." "If He be the King of Israel," "if God will have Him," were torture to His soul. We are on Satan's side in the great final struggle if we talk about "if the Bride does not repent and does not make herself ready," or "if the church does not respond." That doubt of Christ's complete vindication paralyzes one's devotion like nerve gas paralyzes a person's will. No one can work wholeheartedly for denominational repentance if he or she harbors a secret doubt that it is possible or that it is necessary. This doubt underlies much of our present confusion, inertia, and disunity. But it is treason to Christ, as surely as were Judas' betrayal and Peter's denial of Him.

The medicine must fit the disease. Christ's intent is that repentance be ministered throughout the church at large.

It is true that we may individually battle for personal victory over evil temper, perverted appetite, love of amusement, pride of dress, sensuality, or a thousand other failings. But the point of the Lord's appeal in Revelation 3 is that as a church and, more particularly as church leadership, we are guilty of *denominational* sin. This is specifically (a) denominational pride ("You say, I am rich and I have been enriched"); (b) denominational self-satisfaction ("You say, ... I have need of nothing"); (c) denominational self-deception ("You ... do not know that you are wretched"); and (d) denominational assumptions of success which are not divinely validated ("You are miserable, poor, blind, and naked").

The remedies proposed are specific: "gold refined in the fire," "white garments," and "eye salve." Upon the minds of church leadership there will be deeply impressed as never before in history a sense of our true role on the stage of the universe. "The house of David" will be deeply humbled by a new view of the crucifixion of Christ and their part in it, and then there will be "opened" that "fountain ... for sin and for uncleanness" (Zechariah 12:10; 13:1).

## **We Must and Can Succeed Where the Jews Failed**

With the repentance of Nineveh standing in sacred history as the model, we see the pattern that will develop in the church today. "From the greatest of them to the least of them," the repentance in the Laodicean message will spread from the top to the bottom throughout the worldwide church. Unless Christ's sacrifice is in vain, it will *eventually* come, and both the writer and the reader of this book can find a way to hasten that day.

When this is understood and embraced by the "angel" of the church, the methods of its promotion will be uniquely effective. The Holy Spirit, not Madison Avenue promotional techniques, will have "caused it to be proclaimed and published." As in Nineveh's day, "the king and his nobles" will range themselves solidly in support of what Christ calls for (see Jonah 3:5-9). This principle invests every individual member with vital importance. This is because corporate repentance does not merely "sigh and cry" but works effectively by the faith of Christ to cooperate *with Him* in His final work of atonement. "One who is feeble ... in that day shall be like David, and the house of David shall be like God, like the Angel of the Lord" (Zechariah 12:8). The Lord can still use humble instruments to do a great work. But they must diligently do their homework, discipline their minds, and become informed.

Although in the past the Lord's calls to repent have usually been refused, we must not expect that His final call also must fail. The prophetic picture is clear: something must happen in the end of time that has never happened before. The long sad history of millenniums of darkness must be reversed. This is required by the Bible doctrine of the cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary. The remnant church will glorify the Lord and vindicate Him in a way that has never yet been done. The key element will be a true and pure message of righteousness by faith, "the third angel's message in verity."

## **Evidence More Important Than Our Subjective Feelings**

Our fallible method of considering the church's relative goodness or badness is not a valid method of judgment. Her identity does not depend on our subjective human judgment of her virtues or her failings. It depends on the objective criteria of Bible prophecy and the creative capacity of *agape*. Thus the real test of our faith is centered in Scripture itself.

The prophecies of Daniel and Revelation pinpoint the rise of the last-day church commissioned to proclaim the everlasting gospel in its final setting. The history of the rise of this church demonstrates that it fulfills the criteria, but thus far she may have failed to accomplish her task.

The solution to the problem of her obvious infidelity is denominational repentance, not denominational disintegration. This is the only work the High Priest can minister in the final Day of Atonement. Daniel's prophecy (8:14) declares that it "shall" take place, not perhaps or maybe. The time has come to believe it wholeheartedly, so that we can release our brakes and unitedly cooperate with Him in His task.

## **The Larger Issue: Christ's Honor**

Thus the church will "make herself ready" to be the Bride of Christ. He deserves this practical fruitage of His sacrifice. He has suffered enough, and at last His church will give him the complete surrender that a bride gives to her husband.

There are sincere church members who have doubted that such a vindication will ever take place. They need to understand that their doubting "ifs" are hindering the true work of God. These doubts are motivating souls to defect to the ranks of the one who is determined that Christ shall not be honored at last. The Lord's most serious problem is not the outward enemies of His work, but the blindness and unbelief among His professed followers.

Have you ever heard of a bride in a wedding ceremony refusing to accept the bridegroom in spite of his assurances of faithful love? Wouldn't such a bridegroom be terribly humiliated?

Can you think of any greater tragedy in the end of history than for a disappointed Christ to stand before "the door" knocking in vain and ultimately turning away in the humiliation of defeat? That is what the devil wants! Why should we give in to him by default? The picture we see in Scripture indicates complete success. "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit, a broken and a contrite heart—these, O God, You will not despise" (Psalm 51:17). By virtue of the infinite sacrifice on Calvary, we must choose to believe that the Laodicean message will fully accomplish its objective.

That which God purposed to do for the world through Israel, the chosen nation, He will finally accomplish through His church on earth today. He has "let out His vineyard unto other husbandmen," even to His covenant-keeping people, who faithfully "render Him the fruits in their seasons" (*Prophets and Kings*, pages 713, 714).

The Laodicean church is the new covenant church. Not for her own intrinsic goodness will the Lord remain loyal to her, but because He has to be a covenant-keeping God. "Not because of your righteousness or the uprightness of your heart that you go in to possess their land, but ... [that] the Lord your God ... may fulfill the word which the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob" (Deuteronomy 9:5). That covenant aspect of Christ's character is the assurance that the message to Laodicea will not fail.

We have no right to sit in judgment on our Lord's call, and deliberate over it as though it were a human suggestion someone makes. Perish the very thought! Is it not sufficient that *the Lord* calls for repentance? How dare anyone say, "Well, I like the idea, but I doubt it will work," or, "In my personal opinion, we're not all that bad that we need denominational repentance." No committee or conference can dare to contradict Christ's call.

We read that

the Infinite One still keeps account with the nations. While His mercy is tendered with calls to repentance, this account remains open; but when the figures reach a certain amount which God has fixed, the ministry of His wrath begins. The account is closed (*Prophets and Kings*, page 364).

If He keeps account with nations, why can't He also keep an account with a *denomination*?

The universe of Heaven is watching us on their equivalent of TV. They also watched the crucifixion of the Prince of glory. They have seen that He has called for a humbling of heart, contrition, melting of soul, from the denomination that prides itself on being "the remnant church."

What response will they see us make in our generation?

## Chapter Eleven

# The Practical Problem: How Can a Church of Millions of Members Repent?

*Does our complex machinery get in the way of the Holy Spirit's working? As we get bigger and bigger, must we drift farther from Christ? There must be an answer.*

How is it possible for a large organized church to repent? Must the body become spiritually more disjointed and uncoordinated, like a quadriplegic whose spasms and jerks are uncontrollable by the head?

The essential quality of repentance remains the same in all ages and in all circumstances. People, not machines, not organizations, repent. But the repentance called for from Laodicea is unique in circumstances, depth, and extent. The church is not a machine, nor is its organization an impersonal force. The church is a "body," and its organism is its vital functioning capacity. The individuals comprising this body can repent as a body because each member is integrally one with every other member.

As we have seen, *metanoia* (Greek for repentance) literally means "perceptive afterthought." It cannot be complete until the close of probationary history when history's guilt is at last discerned. So long as there is a tomorrow which will provide further reflection on the meaning of our "mind" today, or so long as another's sins may yet disclose to us our own deeper guilt, our repentance must remain to that extent incomplete.

But it will grow, for "at every advance step in Christian experience our repentance will deepen" (*Christ's Object Lessons*, page 160). The High Priest who is cleansing the heavenly sanctuary has not abdicated His work. His people may fail to learn their lessons, but He will bring them back over the same ground to test them again and again until they overcome. The final test may be in process now (see *Testimonies*, vol. 4, page 214; vol. 5, page 623).

### A Bright Future for God's Work

A beautiful experience is on the program of coming events, unique in history. We have often neglected that heartwarming prophecy from Zechariah, the Christ-centered prophet of the latter rain. He tells us that there will come to the last-day church and its leadership a heart-response to Calvary that will completely transform the church. Speaking through him of the final events, the Lord says:

And I will pour on the house of David and on the inhabitants of Jerusalem the Spirit of grace and supplication; then they will look on Me whom they have pierced; they will mourn for Him as one mourns for his only son.... In that day a fountain shall be opened for the house of David and for the inhabitants of Jerusalem, for sin and for uncleanness (Zechariah 12:10-13:1).

Who is "the house of David"? It was anciently the government of the denominated people of God. Zechariah refers to the leadership of the last-day church, the same as "the angel of the church," or "the king and his nobles" to borrow Jonah's terminology. They are "the men of Judah" whom Daniel distinguishes from "the inhabitants of Jerusalem" (Daniel 9:7). "The house of David" includes all levels of leadership in the organized church.

Who are the "inhabitants of Jerusalem"? Jerusalem is a "city" of Abraham's descendants, the organized body of God's people. In Zechariah's day, it was the capital of a distinct group

of people called to represent the true God to the nations of the world, a corporate, denominated body of professed worshippers.

"The Spirit of grace and supplication" is not to be poured out on scattered individual descendants of Abraham, but on the inhabitants of the "city," a visible body of God's denominated people on earth. (It is implied that no descendant of Abraham choosing to dwell outside "Jerusalem" will share in the blessing. After the Babylonian Captivity, those Jews were indeed lost to history who chose to remain in the nations where they were scattered, refusing to move back to the corporate, ancestral nation in Palestine.)

Does it seem impossible that a spirit of contrition can be poured out on a leadership and a world church congested by organizational complexity? The more involved the church becomes with its multitudinous entities, the greater is the danger of its huge collective self choking the simple, direct promptings of the Holy Spirit. Each individual catching a vision is tempted to feel that his hands are tied—what can he do? The great organizational monolith, permeated with formalism and lukewarmness, seems to move only at a snail's pace. Aside from this "Spirit of grace and supplication," the nearer we come to the end of time and the bigger the church becomes, the more complex and congested is its movement, and the more remote appears the prospect of this experience.

But let us not overlook what the Bible says. We need to remember that long before we developed our intricate systems of church organization, the Lord created infinitely more complex systems of organization, and yet "the spirit ... was in the wheels" (Ezekiel 1:20). Our problem is not the complexity of organization; it is the collective love of self. And the message of the cross can take care of that!

### **Why the World Needs God's People**

The world needs a "Jerusalem" as a **"witness to all nations."** Without her, the task cannot be done. The history of old Jerusalem's failure proves that without "the Spirit of grace and of supplications," denominational organization inevitably becomes rigid and misrepresentative of its divine mission. Zechariah says that a correct view of Calvary imparts contrition ("they will look on Me whom they [not the Jews and Romans of a past millennium] have pierced"). Thus the vision of the cross will provide the ultimate solution to the problem of human "sin and uncleanness."

What is "uncleanness"? It must be that deeper layer of unrealized selfish motivation that underlies all sin, which must be cleansed in the Day of Atonement, but which has never been fully accomplished in any previous generation. The motivation of fear of hell with the reverse side of the same coin, hope of eternal reward, will give way to the pure constraint of the love of Christ. The collective love of self will be "crucified with Christ."

How does that "Spirit of grace and supplication" work? Two distinct elements make up this remarkable experience: (a) "the Spirit of grace," an appreciation of the cross, a view of God's character of love completely devastating and annihilating to human self-sufficiency and pride; and (b) "the Spirit of supplication," prayer arising from melted, contrite hearts.

The difference in essential quality between this "supplication" and ordinary formal prayers is great. People will immediately detect the genuineness of such prayer because it will come from hearts humbled by corporate repentance. When prayer comes from such a heart, says David, then will we "teach transgressors Your ways, and sinners shall be converted to You" (Psalm 51:13). Soul-winning will become successful.

The Spirit pervading every congregation will be recognized. In close context to Zechariah's prophecy of chapter 10, we find another prophecy showing what will be the results of such denominational repentance:



People from around the world will come on pilgrimages and pour into Jerusalem from many foreign cities to attend these celebrations. People will write their friends in other cities [denominations] and say, 'Let's go to Jerusalem to ask the Lord to bless us, and be merciful to us. I'm going! Please come with me. Let's go now!' (Zechariah 8:20, 21, *Living Prophecies*, paraphrased by Kenneth N. Taylor).

### **The Cross and Denominational Repentance**

What can anyone do to hasten this day? Must we go into our graves and leave it to some future generation?

If we refuse the repentance Christ calls for, the answer must be Yes. If we hold to "business-as-usual" pride and dignity, the answer must be Yes. If we *permit* past negative patterns of leadership reaction to continue, the answer must be Yes. The answer can and will be No when personal and group love of self is crucified with Christ. Only then will anyone have the courage to bear witness to truth in sanctified opposition to unsanctified group-think.

The answer to the question "How?" is the message of the cross. "They shall look on Me whom they have pierced," the Lord says. Here is focused the full recognition of corporate guilt; and the "Spirit" bestowed can only follow a full, frank repentance of the body. All human sin centers in the murder of the Son of God. So long as this is not perceived, the "Spirit of grace and supplication" is unwelcome to proud hearts and therefore not receivable. We then remain childish, tragically content to strut on the stage of the universe unaware of our true pathetic condition. A knowledge of the full truth brings sorrow for sin, not a self-centered fear of punishment, but a Christ-centered empathy for Him in His sufferings and a wholehearted concern for His vindication.

This transfer of concern from self to Christ will be thorough and pervasive. It has never been fully realized since apostolic days. "They will mourn for Him, as one mourns for his only son, and grieve for Him, as one grieves for a firstborn" (Zechariah 12:10). Thank God, most of us have never known that particular kind of grief; yet we can begin to appreciate it. We will sing, "Out of the depths I have cried to You, O Lord" (Psalm 130:1). To shift our focus of concern from anxiety regarding our own salvation to such concern for Christ—this phenomenon the Holy Spirit alone can accomplish.

Our natural concern for our own personal security has often permeated our spiritual experience in our hymns, our prayers, our sermons. If there were no power of the Holy Spirit to accomplish the miracle of this change, we might estimate that decades, perhaps even centuries, would be needed to effect such a transformation in human nature. But a "short work" is possible, and has been promised (Romans 9:28). If Communism in Eastern Europe could collapse so suddenly, surely Laodicea's unbelief can collapse in a short time.

The last church is composed of individuals like everyone else in human history, born with a "carnal mind," the natural unregenerate heart of the sinner. But the revelation of truth will work for them a transformation of mind. The more fully the mind of Christ is received, the deeper becomes their sense of contrition. The after-perception of the enlightened mind views sin without illusion. Laodicea at last has her eyes open.

### **It's Good News, Not Bad**

Nevertheless, this repentance is the opposite of despair or gloom. When we can view our sinful state with the repentance of enlightened "after perception," we can truly appreciate the "Good News" in it. Those who fear repentance lest it induce gloom or sadness misunderstand the mind of Christ and close their hearts to the healing power of the Holy Spirit. The laughter of the world is superficial and quickly turns to despair under trial. "Not

as the world gives" is the joy of Christ, consistent with His being a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief (see John 14:27; Isaiah 53:3). As the remnant church ministers amidst the tragic disintegration of human life that will characterize the last days, that deep unending joy of the Lord will emerge from a realistic contrition. A closer walk with the "man of sorrows" will enable God's people to help the homeless and hungry, those dying with AIDS, and those weeping over their broken homes.

Repentance for the *individual* is perceptive afterthought, a change of mind that views *personal* character and history in the light of Calvary. What was previously unrealized in the life becomes known. The deep-seated selfishness of the soul, the corruption of the motives, all are viewed in the light that streams from the cross.

Repentance for the *church body* is the same perceptive afterthought, but it views *denominational history* from the perspective of Calvary. What was previously unrealized within history becomes known. Movements and developments that were mysterious at the time are seen in their larger, truer significance. Pentecost forever defines this glorious reality of repentance.

### **The "Why" of Apostolic Success**

The secret of the early church's success was an understanding that "you crucified Christ," after which true repentance followed naturally. Christ crucified became the central appeal of all the apostles' ministry. The Book of Acts would never have been written unless the members of the early church had realized their involvement through the joyful experience of appropriate repentance.

From Acts 10 onwards we read of how others besides Jews partook of the same experience. The apostles marvelled that the Gentiles should experience the same profound response to the cross that the believing Jews did, and thus receive the gift of the Holy Spirit (Acts 10:44-47). The Holy Spirit sent the truth closer home than the apostles expected. Their contrite hearers identified *themselves with the Jews* and recognized their share of the guilt. In other words the Gentiles experienced a corporate repentance.

Nothing in Scripture indicates that the full reception of the Holy Spirit in the last days will be any different.

## *Chapter Twelve*

### **What Our Denominational History Tells Us**

*The Bad News: We have lost some battles; the Good News: the war is not over.*

Does our denominational history give meaning to Christ's call for last-day repentance? There are several possible ways of looking at our history:

1. *We can view our past with pride like a sports team that almost never loses a game.* This attitude is thought to be loyalty, for it assumes that God's blessings on the church are His approval of our spiritual condition. The result is apathy and pervasive lukewarmness. This is by far the most popular view of our history, but its spiritual pride is the opposite of New Testament faith which always includes the element of contrition.

2. *In contrast, others view our history with despair.* There are real failures in our history that some interpret as evidence that the Lord has cast off this church. This view has produced various offshoots, and continually spawns new movements of fruitless, destructive criticism. Often these movements are initiated as a legitimate protest against spiritual pride or apostasy, although they seldom offer a practical solution to the problem.

But there is something that both groups hold in common: Both strenuously oppose denominational repentance. The first group oppose it on the grounds that it is *unnecessary*. Even the suggestion is regarded as impertinent, disloyal, as the ancient priests regarded Jeremiah's appeals for national repentance. The second group reject it on the grounds that it is *impossible*, since they assume that the Lord has withdrawn from the church both the privilege and the possibility of such repentance.

There is a third view possible:

3. *We can view our history with a confidence born of contrition.* This is the realistic approach. This church is the true "remnant" of prophecy which God has raised up. The world has not yet truly heard the message, and His people have not as yet been prepared for the return of Christ. This view "rejoices in the truth." It does not seek to evade or suppress the obvious facts of denominational history that call for repentance and reformation. Our failure to honor our Lord requires simply that we fall to our knees. Nevertheless, realism highlights the future with hope. The joy of the Lord always accompanies repentance.

### **Attempts to Explain the Long Delay**

Truth always gives ground for hope. Denying or suppressing the truth produces frustrated despair. The reason is that the human conscience recognizes the reality of the passage of time, the pervading spiritual inertia, and the distressing world outlook. A disregard of Christ's call to repent will inevitably destroy the morale of thoughtful, informed church members all over the world. The loss to the church is incalculable.

We are forced to recognize that the long delay must be explained in some way. Something somewhere has to "give." Four possible solutions are usually suggested:

1. *Some say that the integrity of the church itself must "give."* That is, its hopes have been disappointed because its very existence, they say, has become illegitimate. It has forfeited the favor of God, they add, and no longer represents a valid movement of His leading. Ultimately, this view logically assumes a holier-than-thou stance.

2. *Some theologians say that fundamental doctrines of the church must "give."* The pioneers were theologically naive. In particular, the sanctuary doctrine that built the Advent Movement into a unique denomination, they say, is not scriptural. Again, this proposed solution is a fatal consequence of decades-long famine for the "third angel's message in verity," the 1888 relationship of righteousness by faith to the cleansing of the sanctuary.

3. *Some propagandists suggest that our understanding of "the Spirit of Prophecy" must "give."* Ellen White did not enjoy, they say, the extent of divine inspiration that we have thought was the case. She was inspired only in the sense that other nineteenth century religious writers were inspired. Something must "give," and the carnal heart, having long resented Ellen White's high, Christlike standards, would like to destroy her prophetic credibility. "We will not have this man to reign over us" was the cry of rebellious Israel concerning Jesus. Now we face the same revolt against "the testimony of Jesus." It is denigrated as a nineteenth-century hangover.

4. *Some suggest that the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was the real second Advent, and it has been going on ever since.* The longer the Great Delay continues, the stronger will be the temptation to restructure the doctrine of the second coming and abandon belief in a personal, literal, imminent return of Jesus.

Implicit in all the above lurks a virtual charge against God Himself. "My Lord delays His coming" is the reechoing theme. From the days of the pioneers, it is assumed, He has mocked the prayers of a sincere people who have stood loyal to His commandments and the faith of Jesus, against the ridicule of other Christian churches and the world. This view requires us to believe that He has disappointed His people, not only on October 22, 1844, but continually ever since. The question at issue is the faithfulness of God!

### **The Historical Solution to Our Impasse**

If we understand Christ's call to "the angel of the church of the Laodiceans" as a call to denominational repentance, then we can see the four proposed solutions above in a different light:

1. The integrity of the church remains intact as the true "remnant" of the Bible prophecies.

2. Our foundational doctrines remain valid, being thoroughly scriptural.

3. Ellen White endures criticism and attacks as a true, honest agent who exercised the prophetic gift of "the testimony of Jesus."

4. The descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost is not confused with the future personal, literal second coming of Christ. The Lord has not delayed His coming nor has He mocked the sincere prayers of His people since 1844. The pioneers were truly led of the Holy Spirit in their understanding of the prophecies, the second advent, and the sanctuary. What must "give," then, is only our corporate, sinful, Laodicean unbelief that has thwarted all of our Lord's attempts to bring healing, unity, and reformation.

On the other hand, the alternative is frightening. If *our Lord* has indeed delayed His coming, He has deceived us and we cannot trust Him in the future. But if *we* have delayed His return, then there is hope. Something can be done. Our unbelieving impenitence can be healed. Insisting that our Lord has delayed His coming virtually destroys the Advent hope, but recognizing that we have delayed it can validate and confirm our hope.

### **"Just Like the Jews"**

Our historical parallel with the ancient Jewish nation is striking. They were God's true denominated people, enjoying as much evidence of His favor as we have enjoyed. Their pride in their denominational structure and organization was shown by their attitude, "The temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, are these" (Jeremiah 7:4). The "temple" to us is our worldwide organization, which is as much a source of pride to us as was the temple to the ancient Jews. The Lord did indeed establish and bless the ancient temple, but the Jews' refusal of national repentance nullified its meaning:

The same disobedience and failure that were seen in the Jewish church have characterized in a greater degree the people who have had this great light from Heaven in the last messages of warning. [Shall we let the history of Israel be repeated in our experience?] Shall we, like them, squander our opportunities and privileges until God shall permit oppression and persecution to come upon us? Will the work that might be performed in peace and comparative prosperity be left undone until it must be performed in days of darkness, under the pressure of trial and persecution?

There is a terrible amount of guilt for which the church is responsible (*Testimonies*, vol. 5, pages 456, 457).

Without the atonement of Christ, it is devastating to any individual's self-respect to face the reality of his or her guilt. It is the same with the church body. To face this "terrible amount of guilt" without discouragement, we also must see how God's love for the church is unchanging. Whatever that "guilt" may be, she is still the one object of the Lord's supreme regard. Again, this involves recognizing the creative aspect of God's *agape* love.

Critics who are ready to abandon hope for the church are unwittingly at war with that fundamental truth of God's character. The "final atonement" that we have long talked about must include a final reconciliation with the reality of His divine character in the setting of the antitypical Day of Atonement.

Many inspired statements liken our denominational failure to that of the Jews. A very few examples must suffice:

Since the time of the Minneapolis [1888] meeting, I have seen the state of the Laodicean church as never before. I have heard the rebuke of God spoken to those who feel so well satisfied, who know not their spiritual destitution.... Like the Jews, many have closed their eyes lest they should see (*Review and Herald*, August 26, 1890).

There is less excuse in our day for stubbornness and unbelief than there was for the Jews in the days of Christ.... Many say, "If I had only lived in the days of Christ, ... I would not have rejected and crucified Him, as did the Jews;" but that will be proved by the way in which you deal with His message and His messengers today. The Lord is testing the people of today as much as He tested the Jews in their day.

If ... we travel over the same ground, cherish the same spirit, refuse to receive reproof and warning, then our guilt will be greatly augmented, and the condemnation that fell upon them will fall upon us (*Ibid.*, April 11, 1893).

All the universe of Heaven witnessed the disgraceful treatment of Jesus Christ, represented by the Holy Spirit [at the 1888 Session]. Had Christ been before them, they ["our own brethren"] would have treated Him in a manner similar to that in which the Jews treated Christ (*Special Testimonies Series A*, No. 6, page 20).

Men professing godliness have despised Christ in the person of His messengers [1888]. Like the Jews, they reject God's message (*Fundamentals of Christian Education*, page 472).

As surely as the Jews' history illustrates their need for a national repentance, so does our 1888 history illustrate our need for repentance and a final atonement. The inspired messenger of the Lord was quick to see it. According to Ellen White, the 1888 Conference was a miniature Calvary, a demonstration of the same spirit of unbelief and opposition to God's righteousness that inspired the ancient Jews. The spirit that actuated the opposers of the message was not a minor misunderstanding, a temporary underestimate of a debatable doctrine. *It was inward rebellion against the Lord.* If the Lord's messenger means what she says over and over, it was a reenactment of the crucifixion of Christ—in principle. This reality is our great stone of stumbling and our rock of offense.

### **Our History Discloses Enmity Against God**

Bear in mind that these facts in no way diminish the truth that the Seventh-day Adventist Church was then and is now the "remnant church." The brethren who opposed

the 1888 message were the true "angel of the church of the Laodiceans," and God did not cast off the church. Our history makes Christ's call to repent come alive, and the only reason it has not come alive sooner is that it has not been understood. The church is basically honest at heart, and the long delay in repentance is solely due to the truth having been misconstrued and distorted.

Whereas the ancient Jews rejected their long-awaited Messiah, we rejected our long-awaited outpouring of the latter rain. Note some points of comparison:

1. The Jews' Messiah was born in a stable. The beginning of the latter rain in 1888 was manifested in surprisingly humble circumstances. Both events caught the respective leaders by surprise.

2. The Jews failed to discern the Messiah in His lowly guise. We failed to discern in the humble and sometimes faulty message of 1888 the beginning of the eschatological opportunity of the ages.

3. The Jews were afraid Jesus would destroy their denominational structure. "We" feared that the 1888 message would damage the effectiveness of the church through uplifting faith rather than obedience to the law as the way of salvation.

4. The opposition of Jewish leaders influenced many to reject Jesus. The persistent opposition of leading brethren in the years that followed 1888 influenced younger workers and laity to disregard the message. The church at large would have accepted the message had it come to them unopposed by leadership.

5. The Jewish nation never repented of their sin, to this day. Thus they never recovered the blessings that Jesus' lordship would have brought to them. Likewise, we have never as a denomination faced our corporate guilt. We have not repented of our rejection of the beginning of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, and recovered the message. For this reason we have never yet enjoyed the full blessings of its renewal. The very obvious reality of a century of history demonstrates this truth.

Note how the gospel commission could have been finished nearly a century ago:

The influence that grew out of the resistance of light and truth at Minneapolis tended to make of no effect the light God had given to His people through the Testimonies....

If every soldier of Christ had done his duty, if every watchman on the walls of Zion had given the trumpet a certain sound, the world might ere this have heard the message of warning. But the work is years behind. What account will be rendered to God for thus retarding the work? (*General Conference Bulletin, 1893, page 419*).

The light that is to lighten the whole earth with its glory was resisted, and by the action of our own brethren has been in a great degree kept away from the world (*Selected Messages, Book One, page 235*).

That humble messenger believed to her end that the Seventh-day Adventist Church is the true "remnant" of Bible prophecy, entrusted with God's last gospel message of mercy. She was loyal to the church to the end, believing that humbling of heart before God is the only response we can make that will enable Heaven to renew the gift of the Holy Spirit.

### **The Full Truth is Uplifting, Not Depressing**

The full truth is always upbeat, positive, encouraging. Someone might try to distort Peter's sermon at Pentecost and label it as "negative" because it clearly pinpointed the guilt of the nation and called for repentance. But Pentecostal power for witnessing followed

Pentecostal repentance. A repeat of this glorious phenomenon awaits our repentance and reconciliation with the Lord.

God's love for the world demands that His message of Good News go everywhere with power. We know that it is not unfair of the Lord to withhold from us further showers of the latter rain until we repent in the same way that the Lord required ancient Israel to repent. It can be said of us in truth, "Great is the wrath of the Lord that is aroused against us, because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book, to do according to all that is written concerning us" (2 Kings 22:13). We can pray as did Ezra, "From the days of our fathers down to this present day our guilt has been very great" (Ezra 9:7, NEB).

The reason is that the sins of spiritual fathers get ingrained into us, except for specific knowledge and repentance. Even though we were very few in number in 1888, the character of that unbelieving impenitence has been propagated throughout the worldwide body like a spreading virus. The disease must run its course until repentance can eradicate it. Until then, each new generation absorbs the same lukewarmness. This is not the Augustinian doctrine of original sin. *There is no genetic transmission of guilt.* We simply recognize the reality of how sin has been propagated ever since Eden "through the medium of influence, taking advantage of the action of mind on mind, ... reaching from mind to mind" (*Review and Herald*, April 16, 1901).

### **Daniel's Corporate Repentance**

Our position parallels that of Judah in the days of Daniel. He could have argued before the Lord, "Some of us and some of our fathers were true, Lord; look how faithful I have been, also Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego! We have practiced health reform. Remember how some of our 'fathers' such as Jeremiah, Baruch, and others, stood nobly for the truth in times of apostasy. We are not all guilty, Lord!"

But how did Daniel pray? Notice his use of the corporate "we":

All Israel has transgressed Your law, and has departed so as not to obey Your voice.... For our sins, and for the iniquities of our fathers, Jerusalem and Your people are become a reproach to all that are around us... I was ... confessing my sin and the sin of my people Israel (Daniel 9:11, 16, 20).

The fact that Daniel was not personally present in the days of King Manasseh did not keep him from confessing Manasseh's sins as though they were his own. The fact that we were not personally present in 1888 makes no more difference than that Daniel was not living in the days of his fathers. Christ in His own flesh has shown us how to experience a repentance for sins in which we have not thought we were personally involved. If He, the sinless One, could repent "in behalf of" the sins of the whole world, surely we can repent in behalf of the sins of our fathers, whose spiritual children we are today. The essential truth that cries for recognition is that their sin is ours, because of the reality of the Biblical principle of corporate guilt.

### **Did the 1901 General Conference Cancel the 1888 Unbelief?**

We must take a brief look at an argument that has been assumed to contradict the need for denominational repentance. Some have assumed that the 1901 General Conference Session was an about-face, a reformation that undid the rejection of the 1888 message and cancelled its consequences. This view implies the parallel assumption that the latter rain and the loud cry have been progressing ever since. Large baptisms and financial and

institutional growth are often cited as evidence, even though the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses can also cite phenomenal statistical growth.

It is true that the 1901 session did bring great organizational blessings that could keep our machinery running smoothly for centuries. It is also clear that no deep spiritual reformation occurred. The lady with keen discernment wrote to a friend a few months after the 1901 Session:

The result of the last General Conference [1901] has been the greatest, the most terrible sorrow of my life. No change was made. The spirit that should have been brought into the whole work as the result of the meeting, was not brought in because men did not receive the testimonies of the Spirit of God. As they went to their several fields of labor, they did not walk in the light that the Lord had flashed upon their pathway, but carried into their work the wrong principles that have been prevailing in the work at Battle Creek (Ellen White letter to Judge Jesse Arthur, Elmshaven, January 14, 1903).

In consequence of this impenitence, the finishing of God's work was delayed an indefinite time:

We may have to remain here in this world because of insubordination many more years, as did the children of Israel; but for Christ's sake His people should not add sin to sin by charging God with the consequence of their own wrong course of action (Letter, December 7, 1901; M-184, 1901).

Even so, it was not too late then to engage in an experience of repentance. The Lord's messenger did not write the phrase "denominational repentance," but she expressed the principle. "All" needed to participate:

But if all would only see and confess and repent of their own course of action in departing from the truth of God, and following human devisings, then the Lord would pardon (*Idem*).<sup>1</sup>

John the Baptist could have spent several lifetimes trying to encompass all the needs for reformation in his day. So we could spend decades addressing each departure from the Lord's plan for us. But John preferred to lay "the ax ... to the root of the trees" (Matthew 3:10).<sup>2</sup>

Would repenting of "our" rejection of the latter rain lay the ax to the root of our present spiritual problem? Yes, for that is indeed its root.

But roots have a way of lying beneath the visible surface.

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<sup>1</sup> See "It Didn't Happen in 1901! Will It Happen Now?" a chapter in *The Power of the Spirit* by George E. Rice and Neal C. Wilson (Review and Herald, 1991), pages 100-105. It is encouraging to note that the position taken in this book is a complete reversal of the "rich and increased with goods" stance on the 1901 Conference that the White Estate had taken in previous decades. This is very encouraging evidence that the Holy Spirit is beginning to give the gift of fidelity to truth. The long-awaited blessing may not be far away.

<sup>2</sup> If we could list all current manifold departures from God's plan, we would weary the reader and the angels, too. It would take a shelf of books bigger than the *Encyclopedia Britannica* for critics to detail all of our departures from the "blueprint" in our educational, medical, health reform, evangelistic, and administrative functions of church organization and practice. These have been talked about and written about for generations. The sighing and crying and hand-wringing are endless. It's easy to say that "conversion" will take care of the problem—we've said that also for generations. The "ax" wielded by the true Christ is different from that of the false and counterfeit "Christ." The "dragon," who is "enraged with the woman," seldom puts on his dragon costume. He can even dress up to look like a "reformer" and slash away at all kinds of branches with great zeal, taking care to leave the actual "root" intact—self-love.



## Chapter Threeteen

### Corporate Repentance: Path to Christlike Love

*"The last message of mercy to be given to the world is a revelation of God's character of love" (Ellen G. White). 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 they are to reveal what the grace of God has done for them (*Christ's Object Lessons*, pages 415, 416).

Most of us agree that this is largely yet future. May its final fulfillment come soon!

#### **Love, the Purifying, Consuming Fire in the Coal**

Love as *agape* is not a namby-pamby, mushy sentimentalism. The same God who is *agape* is also "a consuming fire" (Hebrews 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 impregnate the church as fire permeates the coal, the church will become super-efficient in soul winning. Each congregation 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 will become 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, the 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 (*The Great Controversy*, page 612).

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 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." That will include "sinners" we haven't thought much about. The Lord speaks of His true people scattered still in "Babylon" as "My people" (Revelation 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:

The divine Teacher bears with the erring through all their perversity. His love does not grow cold; His efforts to win them do not cease. With outstretched arms He waits to welcome again and again the erring, the rebellious, and even the apostate.... Though all are precious in His sight, the rough, sullen, stubborn dispositions draw most heavily upon His sympathy and love; for He traces from cause to effect. The one who is most easily tempted, and is most inclined to err, is the special object of His solicitude (*Education*, page 294).

### **Repentance Lights the Fire in the Coal**

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 prophecy about "the house of David" seeing that they have "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.

### **Righteousness by Faith Leads to Repentance**

Only a repentance such as this can make sense of the expression, "The Lord our righteousness" (Jeremiah 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 alcoholic, the drug addict, 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 thus, 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/her drowning in the sea, said Jesus, rather than face in the Judgment the results of a lifelong lovelessness. "It were better not to live than to exist day by day devoid of that love which Christ has enjoined upon His children" (*Counsels to Teachers*, page 266).

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" (Romans 7:18). Until we fully appreciate that truth, we cannot fully realize the imparted righteousness of Christ.

This is why the repentance Christ begs 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.* 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 can I 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.

### **The Miracle-working Power of Love**

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:

Tell the poor desponding ones who have gone astray that they need not despair. Though they have erred, and have not been building a right character, God has joy to restore them, even the joy of His salvation. He delights to take apparently hopeless material, those through whom Satan has worked, and make them the subjects of His grace.... Tell them there is healing, cleansing for every soul. There is a place for them at the Lord's table (*Christ's Object Lessons*, page 234).

Paul's doctrine must at last come into its own. The seed sown nearly two thousand years ago must begin to bear the blessed fruit that the whole creation has groaned and travailed together in pain to see at last.

## **The Holy Spirit is Beginning to Work**

The repentance Christ calls for is beginning to be realized. When one member in a congregation falls into sin, a little reflection can convince many members that they share in his or 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. With knowledgeable pastoral care, almost any church can now be led to feel at least some of this corporate concern.

Therefore it is encouraging to believe that within this generation a large sense of loving concern can be realized on a worldwide scale. When this time comes (and it will come unless hindered), 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.

## **This Will Take God's People a Step Further**

Instead of limiting itself to a shared repentance in behalf of our contemporary generation of the living, it will take in 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 (Leviticus 26:40). The "final atonement" becomes a reality, and the pre-Advent judgment can then be concluded.

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" (compare Isaiah 17:6; 24:13). Those who are left "shall lift up their voice, they shall sing ... for the majesty of the Lord" (verse 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, evilsurmising, 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 drugs, liquor, 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" (Isaiah 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 Corinthians 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 parallel to and consistent with the cleansing of the sanctuary in Heaven. Thus it will be "cleansed," justified, set right before the universe.

### **The Certainty of Christ's Success**

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 (verses 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 (*Testimonies*, vol. 9, page 20).

The time has come for a thorough reformation to take place. When this reformation begins, the spirit of prayer will actuate every believer, and will banish from the church the spirit of discord and strife.... All will be in harmony with the mind of the Spirit (*Ibid.*, vol. 8, page 251).

In visions of the night, representations passed before me of a great reformatory movement among God's people.... A spirit of intercession was seen, even as was manifested before the great Day of Pentecost.... Hearts were convicted by the power of the Holy Spirit, and a spirit of genuine conversion was manifest. On every side doors were thrown open to the proclamation of the truth. The world seemed to be lightened with the heavenly influence.... There seemed to be a reformation such as we witnessed in 1844.

Yet some refused to be converted.... These covetous ones became separated from the company of believers (*Ibid.*, vol. 9, page 126).

Here is where we take off our shoes for we tread solemnly on holy ground. This modest volume has attempted to explore Christ's call to the angel of His church to repent. 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 his or her individual 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.

## Appendix A

# A Repentance of Ministers and Their Families

The following statement from Ellen White indicates the depth of response that will come from ministers and their wives and children when the Holy Spirit gives the gift of repentance:

In the night season I was in my dreams in a large meeting, with ministers, their wives, and their children. I wondered that the company present was mostly made up of ministers and their families. The prophecy of Malachi was brought before them in connection with Daniel, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Zechariah.... There was close searching of the Scriptures in regard to the sacred character of all that appertained to the temple service....

After a diligent searching of the Scriptures, there was a period of silence. A very solemn impression was made upon the people. The deep moving of the Spirit of God was manifest among us. All were troubled, all seemed to be convicted, burdened, and distressed, and they saw their own life and character represented in the word of God, and the Holy Spirit was making the application to their hearts.

Conscience was aroused. The record of past days was making its disclosure of the vanity of human inventions. The Holy Spirit brought all things to their remembrance. As they reviewed their past history, there were revealed defects of character that ought to have been discerned and corrected. They saw how through the grace of Christ the character should have been transformed. The workers had known the sorrow of defeat in the work intrusted to their hands, when they should have had victory.

The Holy Spirit presented before them Him whom they had offended. They saw that God will not only reveal Himself as a God of mercy and forgiveness and long forbearance, but by terrible things in righteousness He will make it manifest that He is not a man that He should lie.

Words were spoken by One, saying, "The hidden, inner life will be revealed. As if reflected in a mirror, all the inward working of the character will be made manifest. The Lord would have you examine your own lives, and see how vain is human glory. 'Deep calleth unto deep at the noise of thy waterspouts; all thy waves and thy billows are gone over me. Yet the Lord will command His loving-kindness in the daytime, and in the night His song shall be with me, and my prayer unto the God of my life" (*Review and Herald*, February 4, 1902).

## Appendix B

# Laodicea Is Not Doomed

Serious efforts have been made to convince church members to leave the organized Seventh-day Adventist Church, or at least to withdraw their support and fellowship. The argument is that Philadelphia, not Laodicea, represents the true church that will get ready for Christ's coming. Joseph Bates is cited as a venerable authority for this view. But this dear pioneer was mistaken in this, as he was on some other points as well. Ellen White never lent her endorsement to this idea of his. Her early testimonies about the Laodicean message thoroughly contradict his view (see *Testimonies*, vol. 1, pages 185-195; *Testimonies*, vol. 3, pages 252-255).

The idea that Philadelphia, not Laodicea, is the translation church conflicts with the general pattern of the prophetic picture in Revelation. The number seven indicates that the seven churches symbolize the true church through succeeding periods of history from the time of the apostles to the close of probation (*Acts of the Apostles*, pages 581, 583, 585). The message to Laodicea is "the warning for the last church," not the next-to-the-last one (*Testimonies*, vol. 6, page 77). The message does not apply to apostates, but to God's true people in the last days (*Bible Commentary*, vol. 7, page 959; *Testimonies*, vol. 3, pages 252, 253).

The Lord's intention has always been that the message to Laodicea result in repentance and overcoming on the part of His true people and that it prepare them to receive the latter rain (*Testimonies*, vol. 1, pages 186, 187). There is no hint in Scripture or the Spirit of Prophecy that the message will ultimately fail; God's true people will heed "the counsel of the True Witness, and they will receive the latter rain, and thus be fitted for translation" (*Ibid.*, pages 187, 188). Nowhere does Ellen White say that God's true people must leave Laodicea and return to Philadelphia.

It is, of course, true that spiritual applications can be made from all of the messages to the seven churches, appropriate to God's people in all generations. Human nature is the same the world over and in all generations, so that spiritual principles apply to all. But the messages to the seven churches reveal a progression of victorious overcoming that will enable the last generation finally to reach a maturity of faith and understanding. "The harvest of the earth" will at last be "ripe" (Revelation 14:12-15). Heart acceptance of truths in all the appeals to "the angels of the seven churches" will be necessary for this eventual ripening of the "full corn in the ear ... when the fruit is brought forth" (Mark 4:28, 29). But for the last-day church to return to Philadelphia would be to set the clock back to a previous generation and violate the prophetic symbolism. The messages to the six churches have prepared multitudes of believers for death; repentance on the part of Laodicea prepares a people for translation.

The message to Laodicea parallels the time of the cleansing of the sanctuary and the work of Christ in the Most Holy Apartment. The obvious intent of the Revelation symbolism is to relate Laodicea with the time of the "seventh angel" sounding his trumpet during the "time of the dead, that they should be judged" when "the temple of God was opened in Heaven" and the Most Holy Apartment came to view (Revelation 11:15-19).

The message to Philadelphia obviously precedes the antitypical Day of Atonement, fittingly parallel to the "mighty angel's" work of Revelation 10, which also precedes the final message of the three angels (verse 11). To change the order of the seven churches is as confusing as changing the order of the seven seals or the seven trumpets. God knew what



He was about when He gave the visions to John at Patmos, and we dare not tamper with the inspired order of these messages.

Quotations from the message to Philadelphia which Ellen White applies to people in the last days do not require that Laodicea be eliminated from the prophetic succession, any more than her frequent quotations from others of the seven messages require that we "join" Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, or Sardis.

The problem with Laodicea is not with its identity or with its name. Laodicea is not a dirty word—it simply means "judging, vindicating, or justifying, the people." It is a name appropriate to the realities of the investigative judgment that precedes the second coming. It connotes victory, not defeat.

The name Philadelphia is also significant. It is compounded from *phileo*, meaning affection, and *adelphos*, brother. The word *phileo* denotes a lower level of love than *agape*. But "speaking the truth *in agape*" and growing "up into Him in all things, which is the head, even Christ" is the experience that will characterize God's people as they grow in maturity in preparation for Christ's coming. "The whole body" of the church, the corporate whole of God's people of all ages, will at last make "increase of the body unto the edifying [building up] of itself in *agape*" (compare Ephesians 3:14-19; 4:13-16; *Early Writings*, pages 55, 56; *Christ's Object Lessons*, pages 415, 416).

As noted elsewhere in this book, the expression "I will spue thee out of my mouth" is not an accurate translation of the Greek. Christ did not say that Laodicea must suffer His final rejection, without hope. The Greek is *mello se emesai*, which means literally, "You make Me sick with nausea," or "I am so nauseated that I am on the point of vomiting." But the Verb *mello* does not require a final action. Christ's nausea can be healed; it is possible for Laodicea to repent and thus to overcome her terrible lukewarmness.

Read Christ's letters to the angels of the seven churches at one sitting, consecutively. It will be very evident that they show an historical goal direction oriented toward the return of Christ. Thyatira is pointed forward "till I come." Sardis is pointed forward to the pre-advent judgment. Philadelphia is told, "I come quickly." But Laodicea meets Christ "at the door," and is offered the ultimate honor of sharing with Him His royal authority.

Another internal evidence that Laodicea is the last church is Christ's introduction of Himself as "the Amen" This is a word that throughout the New Testament expresses finality.

Christ's message to Laodicea is closely related to the Song of Solomon 5:2, which He quotes (from the LXX version) in Revelation 3:20. This often neglected truth establishes Christ's Laodicean appeal as that of the Bridegroom to His beloved. Her eventual response is not rejection of the Bridegroom's love, but repentance and preparation for the "marriage of the Lamb" (Revelation 19:6-9). Thus the promise to the "certain one" of Revelation 3:21 (Greek, *tis*) is the offer of an intimacy in relationship to Christ that is not matched in any of the offers to the previous six "angels of the seven churches." "The angel" of the last church is clearly the one whose repentance is unique, and whose overcoming at last presupposes a unique victory and unique honor—that of sharing executive authority with Christ Himself. A higher destiny awaits the Bride than those who are merely "guests" at the wedding. It is difficult not to recognize the relationship between Revelation 3:21 and the glorious victory of the 144,000 (Revelation 7:1-4; 14:1-5; 15:2-4).

Thus it becomes clear that to cancel Laodicea out of the prophetic picture, to consider the True Witness' appeal to end in failure, is to rob Christ of the honor and vindication He so richly deserves. It violates the fulfillment of the prophecies in Revelation. Cancelling Laodicea and substituting Philadelphia requires the defeat of the True Witness, and the final humiliation of the patient Bridegroom who is still knocking at the door.

## *Appendix C*

# **Ezekiel 18 and Corporate Guilt**

Does Ezekiel deny the principle of corporate guilt? He says:

What mean ye, that ye use this proverb, . . . The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge.... Behold, all souls are Mine; as the soul of the father, so also the soul of the son is Mine: the soul that sinneth, it shall die...

The son shall not bear the iniquity of the father, neither shall the father bear the iniquity of the son: the righteousness of the righteous shall be upon him, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon him. (Ezekiel 18:2, 4, 20; compare Jeremiah 31: 29, 30; KJV).

Ezekiel discusses a good man who does everything right, but who has a son who does everything wrong. Then he discusses how the wicked man's son "seeth all his father's sins . . . and doeth not such like ... He shall not die for the iniquity of his father" (verses 14-17). Sin and guilt are not passed on genetically. The prophet's point is to recognize the principle of personal responsibility. The son need not repeat his father's sins unless he chooses to. He can break the cycle of corporate guilt by means of repentance.

But Ezekiel does not suggest that any righteous man is righteous of himself, nor does he deny the Bible truth of justification by faith. Any righteous man must be righteous by faith; apart from Christ he has no righteousness of his own. The wicked man is the one who rejects such righteousness by faith. The prophet does not deny that "all have sinned," and "all the world ... [is] guilty before God" (Romans 3:23, 19). Apart from the imputed righteousness of Christ, therefore, all the world is alike guilty before God.

The son who saw his father's sins and repented is delivered from the guilt of those sins by virtue of Christ's righteousness imputed to him, but he is not intrinsically better than his father. There is a sense in which the son's repentance is a corporate one: he realizes that had he been in his father's place he could have been just as guilty. He does not think he could not do such sins. He humbly confesses, "There but for the grace of God am I." Now he chooses the path of righteousness. Ezekiel is not denying the truth of corporate repentance; he upholds it.