

LAW AND LOVE

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There are two ideas that have virtually become dirty words in Adventism today: legalism, and love. Legalism is anathema to liberals, and love has almost become anathema to those of the opposite persuasion. The latter understand love as a cloak that covers illicit passion, lowers standards, and flouts the holy law of God.

For many, love is a synonym for sentimentalism, a namby-pamby theology that is soft on sin. Sometimes righteous people say they have heard enough about love; they want more stern calling sin by its rights name. More law. More judgment.

For sure, we don't want a cloak to cover sin. We don't want to buy the devil's soft soap and blur the distinctions between right and wrong. I sympathize with thoughtful people who are afraid of a spiritualistic sentimentality that disrespects God's law.

But I also sympathize with earnest Christians who are fed up with disguised legalism masquerading as the gospel. Legalism promulgated for decades as "the third angel's message" is a distortion of truth and is largely responsible for the long delay in finishing God's work. Some 75% or more of Adventist youth leave the church after they turn 18. Legalism has provoked many children to wrath and driven them into rebellion. It was the basic problem in the 1888 history. Ellen White said that our ministers of that era had "preached the law until we are as dry as the hills of Gilboa, that had neither dew nor rain." Yet earnest Seventh-day Adventist leaders were demanding more of the same, saying, "You should not be reaching for the righteousness of Christ, and making so much of that. You should preach the law." (R&H, March 11, 1890). That was legalism, pure and simple! But do we have a problem with it today? Yes; otherwise we would not be losing those 75% or more of our young people!

The problem now is that Lucifer has discovered a sugar-coated brand of legalism to confuse us while we vainly imagine that we have outgrown the old kind. The new form is more deadly than ever. Let us ask several simple questions: (1) What is, and what is not, legalism? (2) What is, and what is not, genuine love? (3) How can law and love be inseparable? They *appear* (on the surface) to be incompatible!

(1) Obedience to God's law is never legalism. The perpetuity of the law is not legalism, nor is preaching the importance of obedience. Legalism is not overemphasis of the law, as though there were some secret line of balance between legalism and grace—fifty-fifty. "Balance" is not the issue; 99% gospel and 1% legalism nullifies the gospel, or "frustrates" it, to use Paul's expression (Gal. 2:21). The 1% of legalism will poison the whole like a small dose of arsenic ruins bread.

When we define legalism as our efforts to keep the law, what do we mean? Is there a clearer Bible definition of legalism?

Paul's two phrases that mean legalism are: "the works of the law," and being "under the law." (The TEV mangles its translation of "works of the law" as "doing what the law requires." This is a wrong interpretation foisted on us as a supposed translation. "Doing what the law requires" is not legalism; the problem is that no one can "do" it except by the grace of Christ). "The works of the law" cannot justify, and "as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse" (Gal. 1:16; 3:10). Obviously, "the works of the law" are not true obedience to the law. They are a supposed obedience which is deceptive. The problem is that they spring from the wrong motivation. Legalism is trying to do the right thing for the wrong reason, which T. S. Eliot aptly says is "the greatest treason."

In Paul's thinking, "the works of the law" are the opposite of faith. The negative definition discloses the positive. Note his contrasts: "Received ye the Spirit by the works of the law, or by the hearing of faith? . . . Having begun in the Spirit, are ye now made perfect by the flesh?" (3:2, 3). "The works of the law" are defined here as the work of "the flesh."

But there is a passage where Paul makes it even more clear. He contrasts being "under the law" (legalism) with being "under grace" as two opposites. To be "under grace" is "the hearing of faith" and produces *true* obedience to the law because it delivers from the "dominion" of sin (Rom. 6:14). The believer is under the compulsion of a new motivation imposed by a heart appreciation of the grace of God revealed in the sacrifice of Christ. This new motivation transcends "hope of reward" or "fear of hell" (DA 480).

Thus Paul's definition of legalism is being under a self-centered motivation imposed either by fear of punishment or hope of reward. It is religion absorbed in a highly refined, sophisticated love of self that keeps asking, "What is essential for *my* salvation? What is the least

sacrifice and devotion I can give and still squeak past the pearly gates? How close can I come to the world and still be saved?" This attitude is evident in the frequent question, "Is it really a *sin* to do this or that?" There is a vast amount of legalism clogging popular Adventist thinking! And it repels sincere, thoughtful youth. We need as desperately to understand the gospel as did our brethren in 1890!

(2) What is, and what is not, genuine love? There are some 1800 references to love in the Index to Ellen White's writings, all of them—without exception—positive. Some 200 references to it in the New Testament are likewise positive. One says, "God is love" (1 John 4:8), if that is true, we should be preaching love a thousand times more than we do!

The problem is that the Enemy has kidnapped the New Testament idea of love (*agape*) from Christianity and substituted the Hellenistic, pagan idea instead (*eros*). Most Christians, and this sadly includes many Adventists, do not understand the difference. The New Testament idea of love is not soft on sin—it is the only effective antidote to it. There is nothing mushy about *agape*; the same God who is *agape* is also "a consuming fire" (Heb. 12:29). Long before the flames of the last days are let loose, that holy fire will have burned highly refined self-centeredness out of every Laodicean heart where genuine faith in Christ will let it do so.

To talk about the law without understanding *agape* "working wrath" actually contributes to sin. That was the 1888 problem. Brethren did not know what true obedience is. Only "*agape* is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 4:15; 13:10). It follows that the remnant church who "keep the commandments of God" will be a people virtually obsessed with *agape*. "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." (COL 415, 416). That message is not soft-soap.

The all-important question in the Judgment will be, Have we learned to love? Not how many "works of the law" we have toted up. Jesus separates the sheep and the goats on that one score of true love (Matthew 25:31-46). John's magnificent chapter on *agape*—love reveals the test of whether or not we know God: "Everyone that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not [with *agape*] knoweth not God" (1 John 4:7, 8).

Further, when "our love [is] made perfect. . . . we may have boldness in the day of judgment." Many Adventists have had dreams

about the investigative judgment and the second coming. New Testament *agape* equips one to walk in humbly yet boldly past all the holy angels and to stand before God's throne without trembling.

No one can receive the seal of God and face the enforced mark of the beast if any fear still lurks in the heart. A basic "fear of death . . . all their lifetime," has made the human race "subject to bondage" (Heb. 2:15). But "there is no fear in love [*agape*]; but perfect love casteth out fear. . . . He that feareth is not made perfect in *agape*" (1 John 4:17, 18).

The practical effect of the cleansing of the sanctuary will be to root out that last vestige of fear from the hearts of God's people, and to replace it with *agape*, which alone is true obedience to God's commandments.

Ellen White never used any Greek words, but she certainly did not mean *eros* when she talked about true love. She once described the change in the ministry of the heavenly High Priest when He passed from the first apartment of the sanctuary to the second. The change was not a mere matter of geographics. Those who did not follow Him by faith prayed to what they thought was the divine presence still in the first apartment. She saw the Enemy arrogantly pushing his way in "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 his counterfeit holy spirit was devoid of "sweet love," which is *agape*. Ellen White did not say that Satan actually succeeded in crashing the gate into the heavenly sanctuary; but he did succeed in deceiving people who rejected the significance of Christ's second apartment ministry. In essence, Satan invented a new legalism, a new highly refined religious self-centeredness, to run parallel to Christ's ministry in the Most Holy Apartment. (This is the source of Laodicean lukewarmness).

In contrast, the little remnant who followed Christ by faith prayed to Him in the second apartment of the heavenly sanctuary. Jesus answered their prayer, and breathed upon them the true gift of the Holy Spirit which included what she called "much love, joy, and peace" (EW 55, 56). According to this insight, the cleansing of the sanctuary involves restoring the New Testament experience of *agape*, which Paul says is alone the true "fulfilling of the law" (Rom. 13:10).

The conflict behind the great controversy for nearly two thousand years has been between these two ideas of love. Long before the Sabbath was changed, Christ's enemy infiltrated the early church with the idea of *eros* in an effort to displace apostolic *agape*. Plato's idea had been a "heavenly *eros*," a noble, uplifting concept that he hoped would lift the world out of its swamp of sensuality onto a path leading upward to heaven. The Hellenistic idea of love would be strangely familiar to us today; it is equivalent to what is usually considered now to be Christian love. It's the same self-centered insecurity that is compounded of fear of hell or hope of reward. It is true that in the past many of God's people knew no other motivation and died with that one; but "time makes ancient good uncouth." That is the significance of the cleansing of the sanctuary! "Gimme that ol' time religion" may be okay if it goes all the way back to the apostles, but if it is the Dark Ages or even Victorian variety, it's not good enough to hasten the Lord's return!

Paul prayed that we might be "rooted and grounded in *agape*, . . . able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; and to know the *agape* of Christ, which passeth knowledge, that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God" (Eph. 3:14-19). "May the Lord lead you into a greater understanding of God's love [*agape*], and the endurance that is given by Christ" (2 Thes. 3:5, GNB). That "endurance" is the same as the "patience of the saints" in Revelation 14:12—the fruitage of *agape*.

We may "speak with the tongues of men and of angels" and yet not have *agape*; we may have the "gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge," "have all faith, so that [we] could remove mountains" through miraculous answers to prayer, and lack it. Worse still, we may bestow all our goods "to feed the poor" and die martyrs' deaths at the burning stake, and yet not have it (1 Cor. 13:1-7).

What an unmitigated tragedy to stand at last before the Lord pleading all our "wonderful works" and prophesyings, and casting out devils, all in His name, and hear Him say to us sadly, "Sorry, it wasn't I who answered those prayers; 'I never knew you'" (Matthew 7:21-23).

What is real love, *agape*? We cannot understand the holy law of God without understanding it, for "God is *agape*."

(a) Human love is dependent on the beauty of goodness of its object. This includes that of parents and children for each other, and

friends. That doesn't mean that such love is bad; but it's not *agape*. In contrast, *agape*, free and sovereign, is not dependent on any virtue or attractiveness. Thus it can love bad people, even our enemies.

The Hellenistic Greeks had a story of the handsome Admetus who was doomed to die unless someone would die in his place. None of his friends, not even his parents, volunteered. Finally his girl friend Alcestis said, "He is such a valuable, handsome, noble man; the world needs him. Yes, I will die in his place." Crowded the Greeks "Here is the apex of love [*eros*]." No, said the apostles; that's not the real thing: "God commendeth his *agape* toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners [enemies], Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8, 10). No one had ever dreamed that such love existed, let alone tried to invent it. It had to be imported from above.

(b) Our human love feels it must go in search of God. All pagan religions are based on the idea that man must be clever and persevering enough to search Him out. In contrast, *agape* reveals God as searching for lost man: "The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). There is no parable in Scripture of a lost sheep that must find his shepherd; there is a Good Shepherd looking for his lost sheep!

The idea of God playing hide and seek with us has strangely infiltrated the church today. "It's up to you to build and maintain a right relationship with God. He did His part long ago; now the ball is in your court. If you don't have the perseverance and the energy to get up early enough to ferret Him out of His hiding place, too bad; He has someone else waiting to take your crown. And if you fail in your search, He'll hardly bother to wave goodbye to you." Relationship may be a two-way street, but the emphasis is on what *you* do to maintain it.

What a travesty of truth! And how it confuses and discourages many youth! They don't see Christ as One who loves us so much that He seeks and pursues us. His love is active, not passive. *He* takes the initiative, and our job is to stop resisting Him.

But doesn't the Bible tell us, "Seek ye the Lord while he may be found"? (Isa. 55:6). Yes, but He is not hiding from us. The Hebrew word, *darash*, has the meaning of "seek in the sense of choose," that is, recognize Him. Isaiah's point is that "he is near" already; stop running from Him! "The righteousness which is of faith" is not that which imagines that we must seek Him out; no, we are to recognize and believe that He has sought us out (Rom. 10:6-8).

(c) Our human love is dependent on the value of its object. This can be illustrated in the African bride-price system (our Western cultures are not much different in principle). The more education a girl has, the higher the dowry demanded for her. It's natural for us to invite people to lunch who we think can invite us back. But *agape* is a love that creates value in its object: "I will make a man more precious than fine gold" (Isa. 13:12). God delights in transforming hopeless people into infinitely precious people equivalent in value to His own Son whom He gave for them!

(d) Our human love feels the constant urge to climb up higher. In contrast, *agape* is a love that dares to step down lower. Five times in his hymn of pride, Lucifer states his newly invented idea of climbing: "I will ascend into heaven, . . . *exalt* my throne, . . . sit also upon the *mount*, . . . *ascend* to the *heights* of the clouds, . . . be like the most *High*" (Isa. 14:13, 14). The love of self, upward mobility, yuppie-ism, is the motivation behind the universal desire to get ahead, to walk over others in one's grasping for power and honor. Often it is seen even in the church and even in the ministry!

In contrast, Christ took seven steps in condescension in revealing to us what *agape* is. Being already "in the form of God," the highest place possible, He (1) emptied Himself, (2) "made Himself of no reputation, and (3) took upon him the form of a servant, and (4) was made in the likeness of men, . . . [and] (5) humbled himself, and (6) became obedient unto death, even (7) the death of the cross." (Phil. 2:5-8).

That last step is the most profound revelation of *agape* that the universe has witnessed. "The death of the cross" involved being "accursed of God," shut out forever from the light and joy of heaven, becoming an eternal outcast from God's universe (Gal. 3:13; Deut. 21:22, 23). When Jesus cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" He meant every word of that heart-broken lament. The death He died was not what we call death—which is in fact only a sleep. His death was the real thing, the equivalent of "the second death," in which hope has perished. Here is revealed those infinite dimensions of true love, that "breadth, and depth, and length, and height" of *agape* (Eph. 3:18, 19).

"Assurance of salvation" is transcended by something vastly greater. The search for such "assurance" is often motivated by inward fear and insecurity, "is my celestial insurance paid up, am I covered?" Such self-centeredness is the essence of legalism, but it is

vanquished by a heart appreciation of Christ's cross. For the early Christians, *agape* did indeed cast out such fear. Not for terror of hell nor hope of reward in heaven did the early believers sacrifice all for their Saviour. Our personal insecurity-obsession as a motivation, so common today, is what Paul says is being "under the law." He preached a purer motivation—being "under grace" (Rom. 6:15). A new compulsion grips the soul. We are still "under" something, compulsively motivated by something—but now it is grace:

"Beneath the cross of Jesus I choose to take my stand,
The shadow of a mighty rock within a weary land;
A home within the wilderness, a rest upon the way,
From the burning of the noontime heat,
And the burden of the day."

That new compulsion under which we live is best expressed thus: "The love [*agape*] of Christ constraineth us. . . . If one died for all, then were all dead: and he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them" (2 Cor. 5:14, 15). That "should" carries the idea that it is impossible for anyone who appreciates *agape* to go on living "under" the compulsions of a self-centered life. The "under grace" motivation imposes a new and higher constraint.

If God Himself is *agape* and if this love is the last rays of light to shine on this dark world, can we emphasize it too much? Apart from it, "righteousness by faith" becomes as barren of life as were the hills of Gilboa.

When Jesus sacrificed Himself on the cross, He "poured out His soul unto death," the real thing which involved (as He saw it then) the hiding of His Father's face forever (DA 753). But this true dimension of *agape* is logically denied by all who hold to the pagan-papal doctrine of the natural immortality of the soul. No soul can ever die, they say. Therefore it is inescapable in their view that Christ could not truly die for our sins. They may eloquently describe His physical pain and sufferings, but they must stop short of appreciating the infinite nature of His sacrifice. Consequently, their view of faith is also dwarfed so that it becomes merely a self-centered search for security. Whereas the worldly man trusts the stock market for earthly gain, the *eros*-motivated "believer" seeks a higher good by the same egocentric method. The only difference is that he is simply making a

better bargain. Many unashamedly proclaim such a self-centered concern to be New Testament “faith.”

The best it can do is to produce a lukewarm devotion to Christ, and that marketplace kind of spirituality where you bargain with the Lord like you do in a bazaar, to get the best deal possible. This “holy selfishness” is rebuked by *agape*. “It is not the fear of punishment, or the hope of everlasting reward, that leads the disciples of Christ to follow Him. They behold the Saviour’s matchless love, . . . and the sight of Him attracts, . . . softens and subdues the soul.” (DA 480). “A true sense of the sacrifice and intercession of the dear Saviour will break the heart that has become hardened in sin. . . . This is the true religion of the Bible. Everything short of this is a deception.” (4T 625).

(e) *Agape* is a love that is a “right exercise of the will.” It is based on principle, not emotion or sentiment alone. Thus *agape* is the healing medicine that cures marital lovelessness and infidelity. Marital love can “die” unless it is enriched with *agape*. Let those who are tempted by Satan to believe that their marital love is dead believe the Good News of the gospel: when you don’t feel like being faithful, when you feel like your marriage is dead, you can *choose* to love with *agape*—the love that literally resurrects whereon self is crucified with Christ, because *agape* wills obedience to God’s law when the natural love of self says it’s impossible.

(3) Thus we return to our question: How can law and love be inseparable? When New Testament love is seen to be *agape*, law and love are seen to be blended into one. This is why Paul could say that “*agape* is the fulfilling of the law.” The secret is the cross. When self is “crucified with Christ,” “the body of sin” as its root is “destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin” (Rom. 6:6). The ten commandments suddenly shine with new splendor: they become ten promises of the glorious power involved “under grace.”

Sexual problems are a plague in modern society. Hurling “Thou-shalt-nots” at people cannot produce purity. John says that “God is *agape*,” the same God invented marriage and created us “male and female.” Human love (*eros*) is not of itself bad; it only brings heartache when it is devoid of *agape*. Genuine faith makes fornication or adultery become impossible to one who appreciates the love of God, for this heaven-born *agape* loves one’s spouse as He has loved us. This is not our works; it is His work!

This is why we are urged over and over to glory in the cross, to make it central in our preaching, to know and experience the

contrition that comes from kneeling at its foot. Why is that preaching of the cross so unpopular and so rare today? Is it because of the widely prevalent love of self and upward mobility, Lucifer-like, that pervades many even in the ministry?

Perhaps *agape* is the solution also to the deep problem of homosexuality. No one need remain “under” the compulsion of feelings or an orientation that his enlightened conscience knows is contrary to God’s original creation. Scripture suggests that we can choose, can will, the love which is *agape*, for *agape* is heterosexual (Eph. 5:25-33).

Many valleys of dry bones may witness miracles of new life when *agape* comes into its own.

How can we learn to love with *agape*? Not by trying, not by working at it, not even by vainly praying for it (though prayer is good, of course). We learn by looking, and looking again: “Here is *agape*, not that we loved God, but that He loved us. . . . And we have known and *believed* the *agape* that God hath to us.” (1 John 4:10, 16).