

THE URGENCY OF CHRIST'S CALL TO REPENT

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February 3, 2010

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 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 297, 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

(a) 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 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.*, pages 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.

(b) Christ respects church organization. He intends that the “angel of the church” shall repent first, and then minister the experience to the worldwide church. (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.) When the leadership of the church “in a great measure” rejected the 1888 message (*Selected Messages*, 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.

(c) 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 the 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).

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 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 F. Pease recognizes that when the nineteenth century became the twentieth, none of those who initially rejected the message were proclaiming it. (“During the nineties the revival centering about this great doctrine [justification by faith] was largely the work of the same three people, Mrs. White, E. J. Waggoner, and A. T. Jones. True, there were many harmonizing voices but no Elishas were in evidence by 1900 ready to assume the mantle in case something should happen to the three principal champions of the doctrine.” *By Faith Alone*, 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, 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 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 of 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 a 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 we 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 millennia 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 humiliation of defeat? That is what the devil wants! Why should we give into 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?