

SPEAKING THE TRUTH IN LOVE

By Paul Penno Jr.

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In an issue of the slick magazine *American Heritage* an article compared the Heaven's Gate suicide group of some years ago in San Diego, with a group who in 1844 had come to believe that Jesus was coming back on October 22 of that year in fulfillment of the 2300-year prophecy of Daniel 8. Historically, the comparison is wildly irrelevant. The suicide group were totally love-less, self-centered and therefore fanatical; the 1844 group, according to sober historical research, were as near to being love-filled and unselfish as any group of people since the early church of the apostles who gave their wealth in an outpouring of love (*agape*) to help people in need, inspired by the then-recent demonstration of God's love in Christ (Acts 4:32). These 1844 people, members of many different denominations, were the true "ecumenists" of all time, that is, they seriously sought to fulfill Christ's prayer that His followers "all may be one, as Thou Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me" (John 17:21). It was Bible truth that brought these people of many different persuasions and cultures into that oneness. There was no fanaticism; just a sweet harmony in their common belief in the love of Christ.

More than a century and a half has gone by now, and still Jesus has not returned as He promised in John 14:1-3, "I will come again." But the faith that

motivated those people in the 1840's now motivates millions around the world who still believe He will keep His promise and return a second time. They set no date; they seek only that the love of Christ may in them be "made perfect" (1 John 4:16-18). But their motivation is becoming purified: it is no longer based merely on a fear of hell or hope of reward in heaven. A new motivation is emerging—a concern for Christ Himself that He receive the reward of His great sacrifice, as Isaiah says, "He shall see of the travail of His soul, and be satisfied" (53:11). That produces the miracle of love for others. The last Book of the Bible sees Him as a Bridegroom at last receiving His Bride, who has at last "made herself ready" (Rev. 19:6-8). Nothing in the world is better News than that.

How can millions of Christians around the world be unified? How can people in a church truly believe the same thing? It's important, because Jesus said that the only way the world can be brought to believe in Him is when His followers "all may be one, . . . that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me" (John 17:21). Something He calls "Thy truth" is the only thing that will unite them (vs. 17). Paul calls it "the truth of the gospel" (Gal. 2:5, 14). The success or failure of Christ's mission for the world therefore depends on that "truth" bringing His people who profess to "keep His commandments and the faith of Jesus" into one (Rev. 14:12).

How could a group of mathematicians come into unity unless they all believe that $2 + 2 = 4$? Suppose some said it equals 5?

Is that “truth of the gospel” so simple and clear that it appeals to honest hearts with a similarly powerful logic?

Can anyone follow Christ truly and not be engaged in warfare? Jesus Himself is heavily engaged in a war known as “the great controversy between Christ and Satan.” He says to us, “The disciple is not above his master, nor the servant above his lord. . . Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace but a sword. . . . He that taketh not his cross, and followeth after Me is not worthy of Me” (Mt. 10:24, 34, 39). No room here for couch potatoes!

Why is there so much opposition when truth is proclaimed, even sometimes in the church?

For example, Bible teaching is clear as sunlight that the New Covenant is the “better promises” of God, and the Old Covenant is the worthless promises of the people (cf. Heb. 8:8-10): yet Old Covenant ideas keep cropping up, and there is tension and suspicion where there should be pleasant fellowship and harmony among the people of God (“Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity”! Psalm 133:1).

Like the prophet Jeremiah who was hounded and cursed in Jerusalem by God’s own people until he longed for a place in the wilderness where he could cry and cry (“Oh that my head were waters and mine eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night . . . in the wilderness . . .” (Jer. 9:1, 2); people who love the truths of the Bible weep today. Jeremiah was not a psychopath; the truth is that his opposing people were at war with God Himself.

After Jeremiah’s death, the Jews began to recognize how he was the greatest of the prophets whom God had sent to them; yet they made his life a hell on earth for him.

The Son of God came one Sabbath day to a congregation of God’s true people in the town of Nazareth, and told them He was the true Messiah their people had looked for, for millennia. Result? The people of God who “kept” the holy Sabbath tried to kill Him (cf. Luke 4:16-29).

The common people “heard Him gladly” but the higher you went in the hierarchy of the true church of that day, the more bitter was the hatred that the meek and gentle Jesus provoked (Matt. 12:37; John 1:11).

A delegation from the intellectual capital of the then world came to invite Jesus to come and teach them in Greece. The temptation for Him was enormous—get away from this bitter prejudice where he could go and teach receptive people; but He chose to stay and go to His cross and be crucified by the leaders of God’s people (cf. John 12:20-27).

He has told us not to be surprised by the painful opposition coming sometimes from God’s true people in the last days. As Jesus prayed “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34), so He prays today.

And the prayer will be answered: God does forgive His people for opposing and rejecting the beginning of the latter rain and the loud cry; but He will also be very severe. He gives any generation only one chance to accept or reject “the beginning” of that

rare and most precious gift of the latter rain. Let no idle word escape our hearts from now on!

Unity is essential. But unity cannot truly be achieved by a denial or suppression of truth. A temporary illusion of unity may follow in the wake of threats and fear; but only the Holy Spirit, who is “the Spirit of truth,” can bring us all into the unity for which Christ prayed. Apparently, controversy or agitations is not always and necessarily an unmitigated evil, according to *Gospel Workers*, p. 298. “The fact that there is no controversy or agitation among God’s people, should not be regarded as conclusive evidence that they are holding fast to sound doctrine. There is reason to fear that they may not be clearly discriminating between truth and error. When no new questions are started by investigation of the Scriptures, when no difference of opinion arises which will set men to searching the Bible for themselves, to make sure that they have the truth, there will be many now, as in ancient times, who will hold to tradition, and worship they know not what.

“I have been shown that many who profess to have a knowledge of present truth, know not what they believe. They do not understand the evidences of their faith. They have no just appreciation of the work for the present time. When the time of trial shall come, there are men now preaching to others, who will find, upon examining the positions they hold, that there are many things for which they can give no satisfactory reason. Until thus tested, they knew not their great ignorance.”

One area of conflict that has raged in minds and hearts for hundreds of years is “justification by faith.” Yes, the battle has been going on for most of the 2000 years since Christ. One entire book in the New Testament is devoted to the conflict—the Book of Galatians. There was no way one could be a Christian then and not take a side either for what Paul declared is “the truth of the gospel” or for the false teachers who came from “Jerusalem” to oppose him. And the battle has not subsided even today! Bring up the subject in almost any church or Bible class, and you will see the sparks fly. Must the conflict go on and on forever? Or can those who choose to believe in Christ resolve the conflict and come into genuine and lasting heart unity? Is the Bible clear? Or is the very source of our faith itself muddled and confused?

“Great truths that have lain unheeded and unseen since the day of Pentecost, are to shine from God’s word in their native purity. To those who truly love God the Holy Spirit will reveal truths that have faded from the mind, and will also reveal truths that are entirely new.”¹

God invites you to come to Him and get the issue settled once for all, so that your mind and heart are clear and your feet are set on the solid rock. When Jesus the night before His death prayed His last prayer to His heavenly Father in John 17 in the presence of His few disciples, He clearly distinguished between two classes of people: (1) The “all flesh” which are the same as the “all

¹ Ellen G. White, *Fundamentals of Christian Education*, p. 473.

people” mentioned in 17:2. He says that the Father sent Him into the world so that He might “give to them everlasting life.” “As thou hast given Him power over *all flesh*, that He should give eternal life to as many as Thou hast given Him.” (2) The second group is the people whom the Father gave Him who are “*out of the world*” (vs. 6). “I have manifested thy name unto the men which thou gavest me out of the world: thine they were, and thou gavest them me; and they have kept thy word.” To them He says He “has manifested Your name, and they have observed [or received]” the blessing which the Father has given to the world “in Christ.” The fact that many “in the world” don’t want to receive the gift God has given them does not mean that the gift was not given to them. If a person refuses to believe in Christ, that does not mean that Christ did not die for him. “God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son” long before you or I chose to believe or disbelieve! Our unbelief cannot annul the faith of God, says Paul in Rom. 3:3. In the final judgment before the Great White Throne at the end of the biblical millennium (Rev. 20:11-15) the lost will realize that their life-long unbelief was a rejection of the “everlasting life” which the Father had *given* them “in Christ.” They will see themselves as Esau who “despised” and “sold” the birthright that God had given (not merely offered) him (Gen. 25:34; Heb. 12:16). Oh, may the realization of the gift *given* move our hearts out of our collective lukewarmness today!

Jesus has a burden on His heart that last night: the disunity that has plagued His followers through

the ages. Could it be that the root of that tragically persistent disunity is the unconscious refusal of “Christian” hearts to appreciate that the gift was *given* to the world? Could it be that in our “lukewarm” hearts we want to circumscribe or limit the love of Christ and reduce salvation to a mere offer? Do we want to glory in our own initiative to receive? When we enter the New Jerusalem do we want to say, “I’m here because I believed! I grabbed the offer! I took the initiative in my salvation!” It seems very likely that those who enter will beat upon their breasts and say, “I’m unworthy! I’m here only because of the grace of God, not because of my taking the initiative to believe. To Him alone be all the glory! I thank Him for all the troubles He allowed me to have so that unbelieving I might learn to believe!”

Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians makes this his plea that we let the Holy Spirit do something special: bring us into perfect theological harmony. His plea is in 4:11-16. God has given the church “apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers.” To preach and teach confusion, tearing the flock asunder with conflicting theology, perplexing lay members so they don’t know which end is up? No, but to “perfect the saints, . . . building up the body of Christ, till we all come in the UNITY of the faith . . . unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” Yes! theological harmony! Paul’s illustration is vivid—he compares all these “gifts” of the Holy Spirit to a human body “fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth” (vs 16). A good violinist’s fingers and wrists and joints

DO what the “head” desires, thus making beautiful music. A basketball team functions in perfect unity. Paul never heard a symphony orchestra like the London Philharmonic; each musician with his unique instrument plays from a different score; if all played the same note it would be boring; but they make harmony in unison with differing parts. No discord! No confusion! But such perfect theological harmony is widely disparaged as “impossible.” “We can’t all see alike!” is what we hear. “We must preach and teach contradictory views of this or that theology, differing in understanding the prophecies, trying to silence each other even in understanding what Christ accomplished by His sacrifice.” Like a bus load of passengers all telling the driver to take different routes. CAN we achieve “perfecting . . . unity of the faith,” “unity of the Spirit” (vs. 3)? A visitor walks into church Sabbath morning, sees the class torn with conflicting theology. He leaves confused. Will he come back? Ephesians gives us the key to finding true harmony: “speaking the truth in *agape*” (vs. 15). A different kind of love that listens to each other carefully so as not to misrepresent each other, “endeavoring to keep the unity of the [Holy] Spirit in the bond of peace” (vs. 3). No more misquoting each other so as to win an argument. Yes! At last, self is crucified “with Christ”! Now the church, like a symphony orchestra, is making beautiful music. Will the visitor come back? Yes, it’ll be “the loud cry.”

The apostles plea is for church members to “speak [teach] the same thing, that there be no divisions,” that they “be perfectly joined together in the same

mind” is not idle talk. This is God’s ideal for His church, and a little known prediction in an out-of-date book entitled *Historical Sketches*, p. 124 states categorically that such blessed heart- and mind-unity will be realized in the church before Jesus returns: “They will see eye to eye in all matters of religious belief. They will speak [teach] the same things.” Did you catch that? That’s Good News!

When one reads Jesus’ last prayer with His disciples in John 17, it flows easily and serenely, as if He were utterly calm and unperturbed as He faced His horrible death. Reading it with the unimpassioned spirit of reading a scientific lecture deprives us of the true meaning of this prayer. It cannot be truly understood except in the light of Hebrews 5:7, 8. In fact, if we say John 17 is the “High Priestly Prayer,” then it becomes obvious that this passage in Hebrews describes this particular prayer! “A high priest forever . . . who in the days of His flesh, when He had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto Him [the Father] who was able to save Him from death . . .” The John 17 prayer was prayed with “strong crying and tears”! The thought of dying under the curse of God (Gal. 3:13) filled the soul of Jesus with dread, infinitely more so than any criminal who faces death by injection on Death Row. The latter kind of death is only a sleep with the sense of God’s forgiveness; the death Jesus faced was the sum total of all hopeless deaths under that “curse of God.” He was in the process of being “made to be sin for us who knew no sin” (2 Cor. 5:21). In a few minutes He would be pleading, agonizingly, with the

Father, “If it be possible, let this cup pass from Me!” (Mt. 26:39). In other words, Oh Father, please find some other way for Me to save the world short of dying on a cross! And then, another convulsion of tears. Perhaps this might help us make sense of His repeated request about being “glorified” in Jn. 17:1, 4, 5, 10, 22, 24. He isn’t begging to be a “show-off”! When He pleads with the Father to “glorify Thy Son, that Thy Son may glorify Thee,” He means, “Please enable Me to demonstrate *agape* throughout the terrible trial that faces Me! Hold Thou My hand! Don’t let Me stumble and fall! Save Me from letting self mar My witness! Teach Me to be patient when they beat Me, pull out My beard, spit in My face, revile Me, lie about Me, mock Me, strip Me, exhibit Me, and nail Me to a tree!” We read that the grace of God was upon Him throughout His life on earth (Lk. 2:52); never did He need it and beg for it more than now. If He can endure, that will be “glory”! And this brings us to the same “glory” that He “has given” those who believe in Him (Jn. 17:22). They need unity! Is there any other way that they can learn to “be one, even as [He and the Father] are one”?

But there is a secret to answered prayer we must not forget. “If TWO of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of My Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 18:19). Praying by yourself may not be good enough! You’d be surprised how rare it is to find two individuals (even in a church) who are totally in heart unity. Not that one must be a clone of the other, no; but the Holy Spirit just has trouble

“convicting” two people alike; one seems always to be breaking away from heart unity in some way. If only “two” could fulfill that promise “in Christ,” they could turn the world upside down—let alone their little church (or their little committee).

The prayer of Christ’s heart still is for His disciples “that they all may be one; as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that Thou hast sent Me” (John 17:21). With His church fragmented, it may seem that even Christ after 2000 years can’t get His prayers answered when He prays by Himself! But don’t give up your faith: Christ’s prayer MUST be answered, or He must lose the great controversy with Satan! Pray with Him, on His side, that His people may be brought into that true, blessed oneness “in Him.”

Some day, somewhere, someone, will understand the “everlasting gospel” of Jesus Christ so clearly that “another angel” will come down from heaven “having great power” and will “lighten the earth” with the glory of that full-orbed truth. Multitudes who now sit in darkness will see a great light and will come to it (Rev. 18:1-4; Matt. 4:16).

And it won’t be only “some one” who understands; there will be many who are in heartfelt union, around the world, of “every nation, tribe, tongue, and people” (14:6). No more theological squabbles! That unity will be as much a miracle as the insight of that “some one” who will see crystal clear what the gospel is with no contradicting confusion. That unity will be in fulfillment of the prayer of Jesus in John 17, “I do not pray for these alone, but also for

those who will believe in Me through their word, that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I [am] in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me” (vss. 20, 21). “The world” will not believe until they see that “one-ness.”

Those who will understand the gospel and be in union will receive “the seal of God in their foreheads” (Rev. 7:1-4), obviously a symbol of a heart understanding of truth that has also gripped the understanding of the mind; they will have pondered and studied; they will believe Jesus’ promise, “You will know the truth and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32).

They will graduate out of old covenant living into the bright sunlight of the new. The old covenant will no longer produce “bondage” in them, but they will “stand fast in the liberty wherewith Christ has made us free” (Gal. 5:6). They will overcome where ancient Israel stumbled and fell. Instead of “crucifying Christ afresh and bringing Him to an open shame” (Heb. 6:6), they will surrender self to be “crucified with Him” (Gal. 2:20).

As soon as they receive “the seal of God” and “follow the Lamb” [the crucified and risen “Savior of the world”] the enemy will launch against them his “mark of the beast” attempt to frighten them into submission (Rev. 13:16, 17); but “perfect love” [*agape*] has at last “cast out fear (1 John 4:18) and they are seated with Christ on His throne to bring to a triumphant close “the great controversy” with Satan (Rev. 3:21).

But must this glorious triumph of the gospel await a future generation? Are there some out there who long to see the victory come now?