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GROUND ZERO IN THE BATTLE BETWEEN CHRIST AND SATAN

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Ground Zero is where the action is. Ground Zero took on vivid meaning for me in July 1994 as I stood just below the spot in Hiroshima where 49 years before, history's first atomic bomb exploded, immediately snuffing out over 100,000 lives and flattening a major city. More recently, on September 11, 2001, Ground Zero found new meaning for a generation that had largely given up on the reality of personal evil. Ground Zero is where the action is. Ground Zero, according to Webster, is either "the land or surface area directly below or above the point of detonation of a nuclear bomb" or, alternatively, a beginning or starting point.

In this presentation I will examine the starting point, the hot spot, the center of action in the galactic struggle between good and evil, between Christ and Satan. I would like to suggest that Ground Zero for this great struggle of the ages centers on the word *agapē* or love. *Agapē* in one form or another enters into every aspect of the galactic struggle of the ages. We will look at this in a series of eight propositions.¹

¹Several of the themes that will be highlighted have been worked out in greater detail in my books such as *I Used to Be Perfect: A Study of Sin and Salvation*, 2d ed. (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2001); *Meeting Ellen White* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1996); *The Pharisee's Guide to Perfect Holiness* (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 1992); *My Gripe With God: A Study in Divine Justice and the Problem of the Cross* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1990).

Proposition 1: SIN Is Love

This proposition sets the foundation of the struggle between Christ and Satan. *Agapē* stands at the very center of the origin of sin. Isa 14 suggests that sin originated in heaven when Lucifer sought to become equal with God; when he loved himself more than his Maker (vv. 12-14). Lucifer's rebellion eventuated in what Rev 12 calls "war in heaven." The result was that "the great dragon was thrown down, that ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to earth" (vv. 7-9). That casting down brings us to the familiar story of Adam and Eve. That story, for all of its brevity, sheds a great deal of light on the ultimate nature of sin. Too many have read the story as if Eve's taking of the fruit was the problem. But when we read carefully we discover that she had sinned *before* she took the fruit. God had specifically told earth's first parents in Gen 2:17 not to eat the fruit; indeed, the day they did they would surely die.

In the temptation of Gen 3, Eve had the choice of accepting God's word or of rejecting it. She followed the latter course, took the fruit and ate it. But please note, something happened in Eve's head and in her heart *before* she took the fruit. By the time she had taken the fruit, she had already sinned. In essence, she had told God to leave her alone, that she knew better than He did what was good for her. She had rejected His word and His will and replaced it with her own wisdom and will. In short, before reaching for the fruit, Eve had chosen her own will and word over the will and word of God. She had put herself on the throne of her life, at the center of her universe. In actuality, she had focused her love on herself rather than on God. And that is the core of SIN.

Eve committed SIN when she loved herself and her desires more than she loved God and His will. She committed SIN in her heart. And that SIN in her heart led to the taking and eating of the fruit. Thus, SIN in the heart leads to sinful actions. But prior to actions, it is absolutely crucial to realize that something takes place in the heart and mind. First, there is SIN in the heart and mind. That SIN in the heart then gives birth to sinful actions.

Thus, proposition 1 in coming to grips with Ground Zero in the battle between Christ and Satan is the fact that SIN is love (*agapē*). Emil Brunner came to a similar conclusion when he wrote that "all evil comes from our desire to be our own master, from loving ourselves more than God."²

For too long have Christians viewed sin merely on the level of outward actions. Some have acted as if becoming a Christian is cleaning up one's life. Such a misunderstanding of the nature of SIN leads to an inadequate solution to the problem. SIN in its essence is not a surface matter, but an issue of the heart and mind. Jesus made that plain when He said, "What comes out of the mouth proceeds

²Emil Brunner, *Our Faith*, trans. John W. Rilling (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, n.d.), 51.

from the heart, and this defiles a man. For out of the heart comes evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft,” and so on (Matt 15:18, 19; cf. 12:34, 35).

At the very foundation of Christian understanding is the fact that SIN is love. SIN is *agapē*, that kind of God-like love that is central to the NT. In Luke 11:43, Jesus condemns the Pharisees because they had love (*agapaō*) for the best seats in the synagogue. Likewise, in 2 Tim 4:10 we are told that Demas left the Christian way when he fell “in love” (*agapaō*) with this present world. Similarly, in John 2:15 we are admonished not to “love (*agapaō*) the world or the things in the world.” Such do not have the love of the Father in them. These passages do not say that there is anything wrong with the world, but they do teach us that to put anything in God’s place is wrong.

SIN is love focused on the wrong object. SIN is to love the object more than the Creator of the object. It makes no difference whether that object is an external thing, another person, or one’s own self. To love anything or anyone more than God is SIN. SIN is love aimed at the wrong target, accompanied by a life lived in the direction of that SIN. Thus, if I love myself more than you, I see nothing wrong in taking your things if I am big enough; if I love myself more than God, I see nothing wrong with disrespecting His name and His person. In other words, SIN in the heart leads to sinful actions (sins) in the life.

Proposition 2: SIN and LAW Are the Same Thing

SIN and the LAW are the same thing because they are both related to *agapē*. Christ made that clear when He defined the essential LAW of God. For too long have Christians focused on the outward aspects of the law rather than its core. The result has been some very mean-spirited Christians. That condition comes about when people misunderstand the nature of LAW.

Let us take the Ten Commandments as an example. Do you think that God had to tell the angels to honor their fathers and mothers or not to commit adultery? And isn’t the seventh-day Sabbath of the Decalogue tied directly to the creation of planet earth? I would like to submit that the Ten Commandments are neither universal nor eternal. Rather, they are an adaptation of God’s eternal LAW to the condition of fallen beings, who after the origin of sin had an inbuilt desire to do wrong.

Jesus helped us come to grips with the LAW undergirding all laws when He was questioned on the greatest commandment in the law. He responded by saying, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment” (Matt 22:37, 38). Millard J. Erickson has pointed out that it is no accident that both Christ’s first and greatest commandment as well as the first commandment of the Decalogue, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod 20:3), focus on loving God above all else. After all, not placing God in the supreme place in our life is the essence of

SIN.³ Loving Him supremely is the antidote. But loving God supremely, in the eyes of Jesus, is not the sum total of the law. He followed up His first commandment with a second, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets” (vv. 39, 40).

Paul agrees with Jesus, but points to a further reduction in the LAW to one basic precept. Thus he wrote in Gal 5:14 that “the whole law is fulfilled in one word, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” He makes the same point in Rom 13 where he pens that “he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the law” (v. 8), and “love is the fulfilling of the law” (v. 10). But in Rom 13 Paul takes our understanding a giant step forward when he directly links the basic LAW of love to the laws expressed in the Ten Commandments. Specifically, the apostle tells us that the commandments against adultery, murder, and covetousness “are summed up in this sentence, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’” (v. 9). Thus he tied the second Great Commandment to the second table of the Decalogue.

Paul and Jesus are quite clear that the core of the LAW is love (*agapē*). But the concept of law does not end with the core. The ultimate LAW of love is made explicit and applicable to a fallen race in the Ten Commandments. Thus the first four commandments are an explication of aspects of the principle of loving God, while the last six particularize specific ways of loving one’s neighbors. As a result, the progression of law is from the one LAW of love to the two laws of Jesus to the Ten Commandments. The ideal picture is that loving God’s law in one’s heart leads to a keeping of God’s laws. As with SIN, a person’s inward orientation leads to outward actions.

The New Covenant experience of Heb 8:10, of having God’s law of love written in the heart and mind, leads Christians to a different way of life from that of the world around them. For example, because Christians love God they will glorify His name; because Christians love God they will honor His day; because Christians love God they will love their neighbors; because they love God they will not take their neighbors’ things, covet their possessions, or use them as sexual objects.

It is unfortunate that some Christians think that they can love God without loving their neighbor. They live their church life as if God’s LAW can be bisected or even dissected. But such is an impossibility. James makes it clear that the LAW of love is a unit. He writes that “whoever keeps the whole law but fails in one point has become guilty of all of it” (James 2:10). Because the LAW is a unity of love to God and other people it cannot be split into pieces. Brunner put it correctly when he wrote that “he who keeps the first Commandment (of the Decalogue) keeps all the rest.”⁴ It cannot be otherwise. Love cannot be divided up, with part of it being assigned to oblivion. The LAW is love and love is a unitary package.

³Millard F. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1986), 580.

⁴Brunner, 51.

The purpose of God's LAW is clear enough, yet people have struggled with the place of the LAW in their lives. Some have seen it as a ladder to heaven, a position that Paul smashes repeatedly in the book of Romans. The function of the law, he notes, is to point out one's shortcomings and sins and thus one's need of grace (3:20-25; 7:7). The law is "holy and just and good" (7:12) in terms of its ideals, but it is not the way to heaven.

A second major mistake people make with the law is to see it merely as being negative. Jesus and Paul, in defining the LAW as love, move it beyond the realm of the negative to that of the positive. Christianity is not merely avoiding the negative; it is living out a life of Christlike service to God and others. That takes a Christlike transformation of one's entire way of thinking. Luther graphically touched on the topic when he wrote, "You must have as great a desire for chastity as you [once] had for fornication." This means, paraphrases Paul Althus, "That the good must become as natural for us as the evil was for our 'old man.'"⁵

Perhaps the greatest confusion in relation to Christians and the law is a confusion between the LAW in its essence and God's many laws. The problem is that people can attempt to keep God's several commandments without having the LAW of love in their hearts. That was the problem with the Pharisees of old. They sincerely kept the laws but broke the LAW and put Christ on the cross. There has traditionally been a spirit of meanness among those who focus on the laws rather than on the LAW. That meanness is especially aimed at those who disagree with them theologically and/or who may not be as zealous as they are regarding particular laws or rules or regulations. Those who have the laws without the LAW of love are subject to the spirit of inquisition, a temptation that has plagued many religious groups throughout history.

God's plea is for us to get our priorities right. He wants us to keep his LAW so that we can truly keep His laws. The order is absolutely essential. I can only truly keep the LAW when I keep it with my whole heart.

Proposition 3: The Cross Is the Ultimate Demonstration of LAW and SIN

Thus far we have examined two basic building blocks in the thesis that *agapē* is Ground Zero in the battle between Christ and Satan; namely, that *agapē* is the essence of both SIN and LAW. Here we are dealing with the two great principles or life orientations that divide all humanity. On the one hand, we find selfishness and self-centeredness as the basis for life. On the other is the principle of self-giving and other-centeredness. The first position eventuates in alienation and hatred of those who block its desires; the second in an outgoing love that turns the

⁵Quoted in Paul Althus, *The Theology of Martin Luther*, trans. Robert C. Schultz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 140.

other cheek and leads to service. We have here the principles of two kingdoms in conflict—the guiding principle of the kingdoms of this world versus the central principle of the kingdom of God.⁶

The outworking of the principle of the kingdoms of this world is reflected in world history, the discouraging daily news, and a record of shattered lives and families. The outworking of the principle of God's kingdom is seen in lives dedicated to loving service to God and other people, especially as reflected in the life of Christ

The apex of the outworking of the conflict between the principles of SIN and LAW is the cross of Christ. The cross of Christ was not merely a vicarious substitutionary sacrifice in which He died for the sins of the world, it also brought to a climax the principles of both sides in the cosmic struggle between good and evil. The cross of Christ demonstrates, as nothing else could, both the love of God and the malignant hatred of Satan's kingdom, a point I have argued at some length in my book, *My Gripe With God*. The cross is not so much a rational explanation as it is a vivid demonstration. It is at the cross that the principles of both God's and Satan's kingdoms are exhibited in full maturity. At the cross the entire universe witnessed the outworking of the basic principles of the kingdoms of good and evil. At the cross God demonstrated that He could be trusted and Satan proved that he was indeed a liar and a murderer (John 8:44) when he took the life of the sinless Son of God, the one person in history who was beyond sin's death penalty. It was at the brutal foot of the cross that the God who "so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16) demonstrated that He was both just and loving.⁷ R. J. Campbell sums up the demonstration of the cross when he writes, "At Calvary perfect love joined with perfect hate, perfect goodness with perfect wickedness, and became victorious by enduring the worst and remaining pure and unchanged to the last."⁸

Proposition 3 in coming to grips with Ground Zero in the battle between Christ and Satan is the realization that the cross of Christ is the ultimate demonstration of the principles of LAW and SIN, of self-sacrificing love and love perverted.

⁶For an informative treatment of the principal conflict between the two kingdoms, see Donald B. Kraybill, *The Upside Down Kingdom*, rev. ed. (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1990).

⁷For a fuller treatment of the outworking of the principles of Christ's and Satan's kingdoms at the cross, see *My Gripe with God*, 26, 27, 93.

⁸R. J. Campbell, *The New Theology* (New York: Macmillan, 1907), 124.

**Proposition 4: People Move from SIN to LAW
through Crucifixion and Rebirth**

The above points seem clear enough. But a few questions linger: How does a person move from that kingdom based upon the principle of SIN to that kingdom based on the principle of LAW? How does a person move from loving one's self supremely to loving God and others supremely? How does a person move from one life orientation to another? The answer is certainly not by self improvement! One author writes

It is impossible for us, of ourselves, to escape from the pit of sin in which we are sunken. Our hearts are evil, and we cannot change them. . . . Education, culture, the exercise of the will, human effort, all have their proper sphere, but here they are powerless. They may produce an outward correctness of behavior, but they cannot change the heart; they cannot purify the springs of life.⁹

Transformation through improvement is the way of humanism rather than Christianity. It is the way of the Pharisee who is a "good" person and knows it. D. L. Moody once claimed that if anybody ever gets to heaven because of anything he did, we will never hear the end of it. Human effort that leads to human betterment is an insufficient solution. It merely leads to spiritual pride, and spiritual pride is a form of self love that stands at the heart of the SIN problem. Here is where Christianity is radical, where it parts company with all humanisms—both secular and religious. Nowhere do Paul and Jesus tell us that the way to become a Christian is to behave better and better. They could have done so if SIN primarily was an outward action or a series of actions rather than a condition of the heart and mind.

The NT answer to the SIN problem is a crucifixion and a resurrection (Rom 6:1-11); a death to the old orientation and a birth to the new (John 3:3,5); receiving a new heart and a new mind (Rom 12:2). According to Rom 12:2 it is a total transformation. In fact, the Greek word translated as "transformation" is *metamorphosis*, the same word used by biologists to describe the radical change from an earthbound, sluglike caterpillar to a colorful, flying butterfly.

The Bible's description of the process of moving from the principle of one kingdom to another is primarily inward and not merely outward; it is not gradual but radical. Jesus called it a "new birth." "Truly, truly," He said to Nicodemus, "I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:3, 5). Perhaps the biggest problem of the church down through the ages is "water Christians," those who have been baptized by water but have not been born of the Holy Spirit. All such have merely brought the principle of prideful self-love into the church. The image of crucifixion throughout the gospels is no accident. Christ had to surrender His will, His very self, in order to go to His cross

⁹Ellen G. White, *Steps to Christ* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, n.d.), 18.

(Matt 26:36-46), and so must we. It was no empty gesture when Jesus said, "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt 16:24,25).

Thus proposition 4 in coming to grips with Ground Zero in the battle between Christ and Satan is that people move from perverted, self-centered *agapē* to the *agapē* undergirding the LAW through the transforming power of the Spirit rather than through effort and self-improvement.

Proposition 5: Sanctification Is the Process of Becoming More Loving

Proposition 5 flows directly out of proposition 4, in that, the process of sanctification is living the principle of the LAW; sanctification is the process by which people become progressively more loving. According to Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, "*Agapē* is a principle by which one orders life."¹⁰ Indeed, "It is the deepest focus of personality. It is that centering, organizing principle which gives direction to life"¹¹ for Christians. It is no accident that Paul refers to the fruit of the Spirit in the singular. It is also no accident that the foremost primary element in that fruit is *agapē* (Gal 5:22). Everything else in a Christian's life flows out of that orientation.

Christians live life from within a new perspective. Christianity affects every part of a person's daily life. Far from being something that happens to people when they are in church, true Christianity transforms people from the inside out. It changes their hearts, but that inner change, if genuine, carries over into family relationships, school, work, and even how people use their spare time. At this point we have arrived at the practical aspect of Christianity, the notion that God-centered, other-centered love informs a life of service. A person's outward actions flow out of the orientation of one's *agapē*. That is true for all individuals, regardless of whether their *agapē* is of the SIN or of the LAW variety.

Luther caught the significance of these diverse orientations. In his preface to Romans he defines faith as

a divine work in us. It changes us and makes us to be born anew of God (John 1); it kills the old Adam and makes altogether different men, in heart and spirit and mind and powers, and it brings with it the Holy Ghost. Oh, it is a living, busy, active, mighty thing, this faith; and so it is impossible for it not to do good works incessantly. . . . He who does not these works is a faithless man.¹²

¹⁰Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of love: The Dynamics of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1972), 33.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 87.

¹²Martin Luther, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. J. Theodore Mueller (Grand Rapids: Kregal, 1954), xvi.

Luther, like John Wesley and others, followed the lead of the apostle Paul in his emphasis on “faith working through love” (Gal 5:6). The God-centered *agapē* of the LAW forms the motivation and context for a Christian’s life. This is the essence of Sanctification, *the process of becoming more loving*. If that is true, someone may be thinking, what about the behavioral, life-style issues that are often confused with sanctification? Here we have a question of means and ends. Let me illustrate with a personal experience from the pastorate. As a young pastor I was holding a series of public meetings in a small church in Texas. It was a very small congregation of only 12 members, with 10 of them being over the age of 70 and 11 of them being female. Now I have nothing against old people (after all I’m becoming one) or females (my mother is a female), but as a young evangelist I desired a well-balanced audience. In spite of the rather discouraging circumstances, a good crowd was attending the meetings. I was especially thrilled that one non-church member was bringing five professionals from the community every evening. Then one day she said she was not coming the next evening and was not going to bring her friends. “Why not?” I queried. Her reply was that she didn’t like my topic, that I was going to tell her what she couldn’t do. I had thought my sermon title, “Why I Don’t Eat Rats, Snakes, and Snails,” was kind of cute, but she saw it as offensive. I told her to come the next evening and to bring her friends, and that she would say it was the best sermon yet.

The only problem was that I did not know what I was going to say. I was preaching six nights a week and twice on Sabbath and did not have any sermons prepared. That night I tossed and turned on my cot in the back of the church until about 4 a.m., when suddenly I had my topic: “God loves me and because He loves me He wants me to be happy.” Now He knows I am not happy when I am ill. In fact, I am a bear to live with when I am sick. He also knows that I am happiest when I feel good. Therefore, He has provided me with a few helpful tips that will make me healthier, happier, and better able to express His love in my daily life.

The next evening, as my lady friend left with her friends, she remarked that that was the best sermon yet. If it was good for her, it was even better for me. Not only had I rooted my understanding of healthful living in the love of God, but I had seen that the real purpose of good health is to make us better lovers. For the first time I clearly saw that health reform is not sanctification itself but is an aid to living the sanctified life. The same can be said for Sabbathkeeping, which provides me time to grow and relate to God and other people. It is also true for stewardship, which helps me to become more like the God who loved the world so much that He gave His only Son. Indeed, it is true for every Christian activity. All are means to aid us in living the *agapē* life of the LAW, aids to forming a character more and more like Christ’s.

Proposition 6: Perfection Is Becoming Like God in Love

Proposition 6 in unpacking the concept of Ground Zero in the battle between Christ and Satan is that the essence of biblical character perfection is living the *agapē* life of the LAW. That proposition follows from the concept that the sanctified life is becoming more and more in character like the loving Jesus and God the Father (cf. 1 John 4:8).

The clearest biblical teaching on the topic is found in Matt 5, which concludes with the well-known verse 48: “You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” That text has sent countless thousands of believers of all faiths into monastic situations in which improving their behavior by avoiding sin and sinners becomes central.

But such an approach ignores the context that tells us the meaning of what Jesus is teaching. In vv. 43-45a we read: “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, *so that* you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven.” I have emphasized the words *so that* because they are the key words. They provide the context of how to be perfect like the Father. And how does the Father act? “He makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (v. 45b). Can you do that? Can you love like God loves? Can you love even those who despitely use you? To do so is to become perfect like the Father.

John Wesley caught the idea of biblical perfection. For him perfection is perfect love to God and our neighbor expressed in word and action. And to love God, Wesley so wisely penned, is “to delight in him, to rejoice in his will, to desire continually to please him, to seek and find our happiness in him, and to thirst day and night for a fuller enjoyment in him.”¹³ He defined perfection as “pure love filling the heart, and governing all the words and actions,”¹⁴ and, of course, all of a Christian’s relationships.

That same definition is found in the context of the statement that has perplexed many regarding perfectly reproducing Christ’s character. The contextual focus is on having one’s love made perfect as people more and more reflect the likeness of Christ.¹⁵

Biblical perfection is a dynamic concept related to maturing in God’s likeness. It has nothing to do with the Greek concept of the unchanging perfection of behavior (generally defined as behavioral sinlessness) that set the stage for the

¹³John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1984), VII: 495; XI:446.

¹⁴John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill, 1966), 61.

¹⁵Ellen G. White, *Christ’s Object Lessons* (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1941), 67-69.

monastic movements of history. Biblical perfection is not withdrawing from society so that one can avoid temptation. Rather, it is an entering into society in a servant relationship to God and other people that ever more clearly lets God live His love in our lives. Thus, Christian perfection is not a negative; it is a positive. No one will ever become perfect by what he or she has avoided. To the contrary, perfection is related to becoming actively involved with others in the spirit of Christ.

Wynkoop caught that idea precisely when she wrote,

The most important single characteristic of the biblical meaning of perfection is its positive nature. Perfection is not, principally, the absence of all that is less than perfect, but the presence of love with all the dynamic meaning of love.¹⁶

Proposition 7: The Basis of Judgment Is Love

Proposition 7 in evaluating the idea of Ground Zero in the struggle between Christ and Satan is that the judgment is fueled by love as well as justice. God not only needs to be just in the judgment, He also desires to do the most loving thing for each person.

There are two corollaries to this proposition. The first is that everyone who could be happy in heaven will be there. More specifically, all who could be happy with God will be in the kingdom. Now that may sound like a rather fluffy statement, but it is filled with implications. After all, for people to be happy with God they will have to be in harmony with the great principle of *agapē* that undergirds the LAW of the kingdom. And having *agapē* in the heart, we have already noted, will shape *every* action and thought. *Agapē* is heaven's way of life. Lifestyles built on selfishness, carelessness of others, and self-centeredness stand over against the LAW of the kingdom and would, if transferred to heaven, continue the present disharmony of SIN that has made planet earth a place of death and misery.

When I think of potential happiness as the key to judgment, I think of my own experience. In the late 1950s I was living on a merchant ship stationed in San Francisco Bay. God and His type of love were the furthest thing from my mind. I was out for me and what I could get, with no thought of others. Then I met a girl who I wanted to be with very much. But there was one problem. She was a Christian, and that caused me a great deal of conflict. Wanting to be with her, however, I eventually consented to attend church. That was bad enough, but then the preacher invited us to dinner during my next shore leave, which was about two weeks later. Those were the longest two weeks of my life as I anticipated the dinner. I dreaded having to be with a minister for an entire afternoon. I did not have

¹⁶Wynkoop, 299.

anything in common with such people. I did not even have much shared vocabulary, let alone principles. The day came, and I was truly miserable.

Only years later could I look back and realize that the only people who could possibly be happy in heaven would be those in harmony with the principle of God's kingdom. All others would be absolutely miserable living for eternity in the presence of One who could read even their selfish thoughts. In their case heaven would be hell.

The great God of love, I submit, wants everybody in the kingdom who will be happy there. But to be happy, individuals will have to have the great principle of true *agapē* (LAW) in their hearts. Those operating on the perverted *agapē* of self-centeredness (SIN) would be out of harmony and unhappy for eternity.

That brings me to the second corollary in a judgment fueled by love as well as justice, namely, God is no monster who tortures people endlessly. Some years ago I published an article entitled "The Infinite Hitler," which won a national award from the Associated Church Press.¹⁷ The basic idea undergirding the article was that many people's picture of God makes Him infinitely more sadistic than Hitler. After all, Hitler's victims eventually died, but God, from one perspective, keeps them writhing in pain throughout the ceaseless ages of eternity. Such a Being would make Hitler and Stalin look like rather pleasant characters.

Clark Pinnock was thinking along that same line when he wrote:

Everlasting torture is intolerable from a moral point of view because it pictures God acting like a bloodthirsty monster who maintains an everlasting Auschwitz for his enemies whom he does not even allow to die. How can one love a God like that? I suppose one might be afraid of him, but could we love and respect him? Would we want to strive to be like him in this mercilessness? Surely the idea of everlasting conscious torment raises the problem of evil to impossible heights. Antony Flew [an influential atheistic philosopher] was right to object that 'if Christians really believe that God created people with the full intention of torturing some of them in hell forever, they might as well give up the effort to defend Christianity.'¹⁸

There is nothing more grotesque than picturing the so-called "God of love" operating an eternal torture chamber. That is Satan's best argument against Christianity. No doctrine has done more to help sensible people turn their backs on Christianity than Satan's caricature of God. After all, questioning God's love and justice stand at the heart of the battle between Christ and Satan. The British theologian John Wenham raises that very issue:

¹⁷George R. Knight, "The Infinite Hitler," *Signs of the Times*, July 1997, 10-13.

¹⁸Clark Pinnock, "The Conditional View," in William Crockett, ed., *Four Views on Hell* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 149-50.

Unending torment speaks to me of sadism not justice It is a doctrine which makes the inquisition look reasonable I believe that endless torment is a hideous and unscriptural doctrine which has been a terrible burden on the mind of the church for many centuries and a terrible blot on her presentation of the gospel.¹⁹

The fate of the wicked in death is not a peripheral topic in the struggle between Christ and Satan. God is either love or He is not. Part of the gospel is that the universe will, in the future, be cleansed of all evil and sin. The manner of God is not endless torture for His rebellious children but eternal death. This is what the Bible calls the second death (Rev 20:14). With that understanding in mind, Brunner's statement that "the wrath of God is the love of God"²⁰ makes good sense. In His judgment on sin, God does the best thing possible in a perplexing situation. P. T. Forsyth is correct in his evaluation,

Get rid of the idea that judgment is chiefly retribution. Realize that it is, positively, the establishing and the securing of eternal righteousness and holiness. View punishment as an individual and collateral necessity, like the surgical pains that make room for nature's curing powers.²¹

God's final solution for those who refuse to let loose of SIN once again demonstrates that He is righteous, trustworthy, and does the most loving thing, even in what appears to be an impossible situation.

Before moving away from the topic of judgment, we need to emphasize that *even judgment is gospel* and is integrally related to the heart of the struggle between Christ and Satan. One point that needs to be highlighted is that the Judge is not neutral. The Judge so loved the world that He sent the Savior (John 3:16). Beyond that, Dan 7:22 is clear that final judgment is "for" or on behalf of the saints, and according to Deut 32:36 judgment is for the vindication of God's people.

A second thing that needs to be pointed out is that, according to the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matt 25:31-46, Jesus pictured the final judgment as being based upon one point, namely, the internalization of the LAW of love. That internalization leads to an outward expression of love in the lives of those who will be in the heavenly kingdom.²²

¹⁹John W. Wenham, "The Case for Conditional Immortality," in Nigel M. de S. Cameron, ed. *Universalism and the Doctrine of Hell* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 187, 188, 190.

²⁰Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1947), 187.

²¹P. T. Forsyth, *The Work of Christ* (London: Hodder & Stouton, n. d.), 135.

²²Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1940), 637.

**Proposition 8: The Praise of the Ages Will
Focus on God's Love and Justice**

This final proposition in understanding Ground Zero in the battle between Christ and Satan is that the songs of the ages will focus on the loving character of God and the fact that He followed the best option in His handling of the SIN problem. Perhaps the best illustrations of those songs are in the Apocalypse of John. The songs of chaps. 4 and 5 focus on the worthiness of God and the Lamb "to receive glory and honor and power." That worthiness is founded especially on the substitutionary sacrifice of the "Lamb who was slain." It will be seen that it is only God's love that led Him to provide that sacrifice that alone has made it possible for Him to justify sinners and yet still remain just (Rev 4:11; 5:4, 9, 12).

The songs are picked up again in Rev 15 and 16. But there it is for His just judgments that God is repeatedly praised. "Yea, Lord God the Almighty," we read in 16:7, "true and just are thy judgments" (cf. 15:3, 4; 16:4). The songs climax in 19:1,2, where we read: "Salvation and glory and power belong to our God, for his judgments are true and just." Before God puts an end to the controversy with Satan with the second death in Rev 20, all the universe will be clear that His ways truly are best. God's great principle of other-centered *agapē* stands vindicated, while the destructiveness of *agapē* perverted stands fully revealed as God in a movement of "tough" love acts to bring harmony into a universe of warring principles. At the end of the struggle between Christ and Satan it will be seen that the *agapē* undergirding the LAW is the only way to life and peace.

It is no accident that the massive history of redemption found in the five volumes of the *Conflict of the Ages* series begins and ends with the same three words, "God is Love."²³ Is He? That is the question of the ages. It is the question that stands at Ground Zero in the battle between Christ and Satan.

Conclusion

The most important single word in understanding the conflict between Christ and Satan is *agapē*. *Agapē* in its various forms stands at the center of the biblical understandings of SIN, LAW, the cross, grace, conversion, sanctification, perfection, judgment, the character of God, and worship. The tension between true *agapē* and *agapē* perverted is the problem of the ages. As such, a better understanding of *agapē* is an essential prerequisite to forming a more accurate biblical theology. And a more adequate biblical theology will, in itself, inform a more Christian approach to ministry.

²³Ellen G. White, *The Story of Patriarchs and Prophets* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1958), 33; idem, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and Satan* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1950), 678.