

THE MAIN STREAM

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on February 10, 1963 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

It is rather inspiring to stand on the bank of a great river like the Mississippi and to look out over the broad expanse of water. It is interesting to think what such a river means. Out in the very center there is a strong current--the main stream. Then as one moves from the middle of the river there are side currents, eddies and inlets, and beyond these there are lagoons and bayous. There is the inflowing of water from the various tributaries, some of which are large and some of which are mere creeks or trickles of water. Beyond the banks of the river there are attached bodies of water of smaller size. There are pools that are completely detached which have been caused when the river has overflowed. There are bayous that may even be a bit stagnant, though once they received their water from the main stream. There are low-lying marshlands. These, too, get their water from this great river.

I mention all of this to you because I think that in a sense it suggest the theme that I want to present. The main stream of a river moves on. It is fresh water; it carries burdens of traffic; it does things. How different it is from backwater, the eddies, the side currents and the stagnant bayous and marshes. Now, a question: "What is the main stream in the life that you and I are now living, particularly as it relates to our Lord?" As I observe the way men live their lives I often feel that they have missed the main stream and are living in the backwater of life. This same thing is often true in religion. Even those who most desire to follow Christ often miss the main stream of Christianity. We have a number of ways of saying this. Sometimes we ask, "What is the heart of Christianity?" by which we mean a comparison with the heart in our bodies, the muscle which pumps the blood so essential to the ongoing of life. What is the heart of Christianity? Sometimes we say it, "What is the center of Christianity?" as we think in terms of a circle and the center of that circle. Sometimes we say, "What is the foundation?" referring to the foundation of a house upon which everything else is built. Then we say, "What is the essence of Christianity?" or "What is the crux of Christianity?" Today I merely use a different figure. "What is the main stream of Christianity?"

Tendency Toward Diversity

You are aware, as I am, that man has a tendency toward diversity of interest and of concern and of activity. No two of us are alike. One man sees a great deal of beauty in a sunset and another man hardly pauses to look at it at all. One man earns his living cooped up in an office every day and another man cannot endure the indoors. He must work outside. When it comes to the amusements that men choose there is a wide variety. Men earn their livings in widely diverse ways and find their enjoyments in different avenues. How different we are.

When we come into the realm of religion, how different the emphasis. As we study the religious groups about us there are some who seem to put primary emphasis upon ritual. The worship must be very formal, very dignified--high church. There are others to whom this would be completely foreign, for their emphasis is upon informality and evangelistic zeal. We look still further and there are those whose emphasis is upon structure and organization, so that the primary thing that stands out is the great structure of the church. There are others whose emphasis seems to be on the social gospel--clearing the slums, wrestling with the race problem, caring for the needy. The emphasis somewhere else is still different. It is on possession of the Holy Spirit and being able to speak in tongues. Close by there are those whose main interest and concern seems to be on what is generally called "faith healing." How different! How different! There are others who would emphasize the millennium. They talk constantly about the second coming of Christ. There are others who emphasize doctrine and who point out the importance of remaining true to this doctrine or that doctrine. So I ask, "What is the main stream of Christianity?" Is the main stream with those who claim to be faith healers, or with those who claim to have the Holy Spirit in some spectacular way? Is the main stream in ritualism. Is the main stream in evangelism? Which if these is a true and which is a false emphasis? Where is the heart, the center, the main stream of Christianity?

The Scriptures Answer

The answer is not hard to find, really. If we can leave ourselves and our backgrounds out of the picture and can go back to the scriptures which our Lord gave us, the emphasis is very plain. One day Jesus was standing teaching his disciples and others, when a keen-minded lawyer came and stood at the back of the crowd. He listened while several questions were asked. "Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar or not?" "In the resurrection, whose wife shall she be?" In each case Christ gave a remarkable answer. Then, this man was emboldened to ask, "Which is the first commandment of all?" What is the main stream, the center, the heart? As a scribe, he was thinking of all the more than 600 Old Testament laws, which make up the Law of Moses. Jesus answered, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength." (Mark 12:28-30). There it is. What is the center of Christianity? It is the love of God, with everything that is in us.

One time a preacher by the name of Philip was sent to keep an appointment which God had made with a man from Ethiopia. When this foreign Jew who had come to Jerusalem to worship came to a certain intersection, Philip hailed him and entered into conversation with him. Then they rode along in the chariot together. At this point we read, "Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this

scripture, preached unto him Jesus.” (Acts 8:35). That says exactly the same thing as Mark 12: 28-30 which we mentioned a moment ago. The heart of our religion is the love of God; the heart of our religion is the preaching of Jesus who is a part of the Godhead. On that lonely road from Jerusalem down to Gaza an evangelist preached Jesus. That is the center; that is the main stream. Over in I Cor. 2:2 Paul, writing to a church which he had earlier helped to establish, says, “I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” In Gal. 2:20, the same apostle says, “I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me.” This is the main stream, this is the heart, this is the center of our religion.

The Significance Lies In Christ

It is only because of Christ and God and the Holy Spirit, who make up the Godhead, that anything else in our religion is important at all. For instance, the Bible receives its importance entirely, exclusively from the facts that it comes from God and that it reveals God and his will to men. It is not the paper on which it is printed; it is not the binding; it is not all the hours that have gone into its translation and copying. Its importance lies in the fact that it is the God-given channel through which we learn of God and his will. Is the Bible important? Very important, because it tells us of Christ. Christ is the center, the Bible is the avenue, the means.

When you who have grown children and grandchildren find them living in a different state, how eager you are to go to the phone, dial the number and then hope that one of the grandchildren will answer. Then, you will get to talk to talk to the whole family before the conversation is over. How eager you are. How important is the telephone into which you are speaking, the line along which the voices will run and the receiver at the other end of the line? “Well,” you say, “Very important.” Why? Because without those receivers and transmitters and lines there would be no hearing of the voices of the people you love. The telephone system is just an ingenious system of tubes, connections, wire, and plastic, but it is important because it is the channel which brings the people whom you love near to you. The Bible is just leather and paper and ink, but it is sacred because it came from God and it reveals God to us. I love the Bible, but it is only because I love the God who gave it and the Lord whom it reveals.

How Important Is the Church?

How important is the church? Oh, the church is important, too. The church is really just the people who have been redeemed by the blood of Christ. It is made up of people. It is not primarily an organization; it is not really very important in itself. Yet, it is extremely important, for only when we are in the church is there hope of salvation. Christ said, “Seek ye first his kingdom and his righteousness.” (Matt. 6:33). The kingdom, or church, is important because Christ gave it to us. It is his family; it is his plan for our entering into heaven.

Those of us who preach and those who teach classes and those who do other work in the church are sometime tempted to forget the centrality of Christ, even while doing our duties. How easy it is for a preacher to get so involved in the work that he forgets the Lord who makes the work meaningful. It is easy to get away from the main stream into the eddies and bayous. It is Christ who makes the church important. Because Christ established the church, through his apostles, because he said it is important, it is important because of Christ. He is the foundation and the bridegroom of the church. The church apart from Christ would be a hollow shell.

Take the matter of religious doctrines. Are doctrines really important? The answer again is “Very important.” In John 14:15 Christ says, “If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments.” Out of our love for Christ baptism takes on importance. Out of our love for Christ the Lord’s Supper takes on importance. Out of our love for Christ all doctrines take on importance, because keeping his commandments, his doctrines, is the way we show our love for him. It is not a matter of doctrines by themselves but doctrines for Christ’s sake. Often we can see reasons for the commands of God, but even when we cannot, we accept them gladly because of our love for Christ.

What about the living of religious lives? Is that the thing that really is most important? How important is it to be moral and honest and truthful? Again, it is very important, but its importance comes from the fact that it is God’s will that we should live that way. Jesus said, “Even so let your light shine before men; that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven.” (Matt. 5:16).

Conclusion

This is the main stream of Christianity. Christ, God our Father, and the Holy Spirit are central. Divinity is the hub of the wheel. The love of God is the supreme, most important element in Christianity. Because the will of God is so supremely important, the Bible is important, the church is important, the living of the Christian life is important, and worshipping correctly is important. Let us not miss the main stream. Let us never forget the heart, the foundation, the center of our religion--Jesus Christ our Lord.