

THE BIBLICAL DESCRIPTION OF A CHRISTIAN

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on February 16, 1964 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Some days ago an outstanding young business leader made an appointment to talk with me concerning the church. Although I had never met him before, I was well impressed not only with what I saw of him, but also with the things that others had told me about him. He is potentially an outstanding business leader. After we had spent some minutes in getting acquainted, I presented to him a fairly comprehensive view of the New Testament church. In this presentation I emphasized the fact that our Lord desired that all his disciples be united, quoting several passages from the New Testament which make this clear. To achieve this unity, I suggested a return to the church as established 1900 years ago, with the suggestion that the Bible is the only possible authority upon which all of us can unite. I proposed, "Let us speak where the scriptures speak and be silent where they are silent." I also suggested that we must have a "Thus saith the Lord" for everything that we do in faith and practice. At this point my friend interrupted, "Brother Baxter, I agree with everything you've said, but my problem is that I have known members of the church who by their lives have caused me to feel an antagonism to it."

It was then my turn to listen. He told me of young people during his high school years who were supposed to be Christians, yet behaved in such a way as to destroy the respect of their fellow students for themselves and for the church. He mentioned business men whose dealings were obviously below Christian standards. He even mentioned preachers, in his own experience, who had behaved in such a way as both to shock and to disillusion him. There was little that I could say, except to agree that such behavior was wrong. I did express the wish that he might have known some of the great host of dedicated, zealous Christians whom I have known, rather than those who have left scars upon the Lord's church by their un-Christian behavior.

Within the week I had occasion to talk with another business man, who told me the disturbing story of a Christian who after receiving the services of his firm was unwilling to pay for those services. Eventually the unpaid account had to be turned over to an agency and action in court was necessary for the collection of the bill. Needless to say, it is difficult for this business man, who incidentally is not a Christian, to believe in the genuineness of the Christianity professed by the one who dealt with him so shabbily in business.

What is wrong with these situations? Perhaps I can convey it by borrowing an expression often used on the popular Sunday evening television program, "What's My Line?" On this particular program a panel of experts guesses the occupation of guests who are brought before the panel. The moderator in introducing a guest often says, "Mr. So-and-So is salaried and deals in a product." It is the expression "deals in a product" that I wish to borrow. The Christian deals in a product and that product is goodness or righteousness. When, as in the cases mentioned a moment ago, the behavior of Christians is inconsistent with the high principles of Christianity, the discrepancy is glaring and disturbing. Whatever else he may be, the Christian must be a man who lives according to the principles which Christ taught. This leads us to ask, who is a Christian? What is the description of a Christian which one finds in the scriptures? What is the Biblical teaching, or doctrine, concerning the Christian? Let us go to the scriptures themselves for our answers.

Born Anew

First of all, I should like to say that the Christian is one that has been born anew. On the occasion when Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews, came to Jesus, there came a point in the conversation when Jesus said, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter a second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." (John 3:3-6). Our Lord was teaching that just as man is born into the physical world, he must also be born into the spiritual world. Christians are twice born men--born physically and born spiritually.

When one understands that all men are sinners, as stated by the apostle Paul in Romans 3:10, 23, "There is none righteous, no not one ... all have sinned, and fall short of the glory of God," then he is in a position to understand why man needs to be born anew. All men are sinners and are thereby dead, needing to be born again. This is made even clearer by the apostle Paul who wrote to the Ephesian Christians, "And you did he make alive, when ye were dead through your trespasses and sins, wherein ye once walked ... but God being rich in mercy, for his great love wherein he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace have ye been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us to sit with him in the heavenly places, in Christ Jesus." (Eph. 2:1-2, 4-6). Because of sin all men are spiritually dead, until Christ causes them to live anew.

Still another way of conveying this same idea is that used by the apostle Paul in Romans 6:3-6, 11, where he says, "Or are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead, through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection; knowing this, that our old man was crucified with him, that the body of sin might be done away, that so we should no longer be in bondage to sin ... Even so

reckon ye also yourselves to be dead unto sin, but alive unto God in Christ Jesus.” Notice especially the phrase, “newness of life.” From his sinful, lost condition, the Christian has come into a condition of spiritual cleanness and salvation.

In one of the early sermons delivered by the apostle Peter after the establishment of the church, we find him saying, “Repent ye therefore, and be converted, that your sins may be blotted out, that so there may come seasons of refreshing from the presence of the Lord.” (Acts 3:19). This passage is especially significant, for it calls men to repent and be converted. This is the heart of man’s part in achieving salvation. Salvation was made possible by God’s grace, but this grace becomes meaningful only in the lives of those who accept Christ as their Savior. This acceptance of Christ must be deep and genuine and can best be described by the words, “being converted.”

In the numerous examples of conversion which we find in the book of Acts, the pattern is always the same and is very clear. In each case the gospel of Christ was preached, those who heard believed that Christ was the divine Son of God. This, in turn, led them to turn away from the world and its sinfulness toward Christ and his righteousness. This act--a decision of will--we call repentance. Then in some appropriate way they made known their faith in Christ and their desire to follow him. Finally, as the culminating act of becoming a Christian, they were baptized into Christ. In order for this process to be meaningful there must always be a deep, internal conversion of will. The outward acts mean nothing without the change of heart which the acts imply.

Just here, we find explanation of much of the problem presented in the opening examples of our study today. There are many people who wear the name Christian, many people who even go through many of the outward acts of Christianity, but who have not been deeply converted to Christ. Half in the world, half in God’s kingdom, these partially converted Christians are stumbling blocks to those who would become genuine Christians. It is their influence that has slowed the spread of the Cause of Christ through the centuries. No greater hindrance to real Christianity can be found than that of half-converted, half-zealous Christians.

In contrast we go back to the New Testament and observe the genuine conversion that took place in the lives of the apostles and others, Acts 4:13 makes an interesting comment at this point, “Now when they beheld the boldness of Peter and John, and had perceived that they were unlearned and ignorant men, they marveled; and they took knowledge of them that they had been with Jesus.” After three years of association with Jesus, the ordinary men whom he chose for his apostles had been transformed into the great leaders of his kingdom.

Mary Magdalene is another example of the transformation that took place in the life of one who at first was unworthy, but was changed by having come to know the Lord. Saul of Tarsus was yet another whose life was radically changed when he came to believe in Christ as the Son of God. One of the thrilling stories of the New Testament is that of the wonderful changes that came in the lives of countless thousands of people. This kind of change is reflected in Paul’s words, “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God., to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service. And be not fashioned according to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God.” (Romans 12:1-2).

New Creatures in Christ

Although the Christian still wears the same name and outwardly appears as he did before his conversion, he is a new creature. In the deepest sense he is under new management. Jesus said, “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me.” (Matt. 16:24). He has new life purposes and goals. Now he is dedicated to the service of God and his fellowmen, rather than the service of self. The Christian has a new outlook on life. I remember with deep satisfaction the brief conversation with a man some years ago toward the end of the first year after his conversion to Christ. He said simply, “I just wanted to tell you that this has been the best year of my life.”

The Christian has a new set of values. In the life of the apostle Paul We find an excellent example. “Howbeit what things were gain to me, these have I counted loss for Christ. Yea verily, and I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I suffered the loss of all things, and count them but refuse that I may gain Christ.” (Phil 3:7-8). The Christian engages in new activities. To quote the apostle Paul again, “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God afore prepared that we should walk in them.” (Eph. 2:10). He develops new habits. Habits of thinking, of speech, of dress, and of behavior in general, undergo significant changes. Profanity and vulgarity of speech are no longer heard. Angry, lustful, envious thinking gives way to constructive, helpful meditations. Indecent, suggestive dress is replaced by modest apparel. Drinking gives way to soberness, and so through all of the activities of life. Finally, the Christian has a new destiny. He is on his way to an eternal life of happiness in heaven with God.

The Divided Heart

It is of great significance that the most scathing rebukes that Christ ever uttered against anyone were those which he uttered against the hypocrites of his day. The hypocrite is a man with a divided heart, having the desire to acquire the spiritual blessings which God can give but also having the desire for the sensual, earthy pleasures of this life. There is no place for hypocrisy in the life of a Christian.

Notice the manner in which Jesus spoke of the hypocrites. “When therefore thou doest alms, sound not a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have the glory of men ... And when ye pray, ye shall not be as the hypocrites: for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men ... Moreover when ye fast, be not as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may be seen of men to fast ... No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon ... But seek ye first his kingdom, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” (Matt. 6:2, 5, 16, 24, 33).

Still more scathing was his condemnation of the hypocrites as found in Matt. 23, the chapter on woes. Listen as he says, “Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye tithe mint and anise and cummin, and have left undone the weightier matters of the law, justice, and mercy, and faith: but these ye ought to have done and not to have left the other undone. Ye blind guides, that strain out the gnat, and swallow the camel! ... Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which outwardly appear beautiful, but inwardly are full of dead men’s bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but inwardly ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity.” (Matt. 23:23-24, 27-28).

Conclusion

In the first century of the Christian era the church was pure and zealous, but the world almost immediately began little by little to seep into the church. By the beginning of the fourth century, in the time of Constantine, Christianity had been so mixed with the thinking and the behavior of the world that it was hardly recognizable. Even though he was still basically a pagan Roman Emperor, Constantine chose as the emblem of his army the “sign of the cross,” embraced Christianity himself, and demanded that Christianity be given equal rights with the pagan religions of Rome. The next step was for Christianity to be made the official religion of the Empire. But it was a watered-down, paganized Christianity and not the real thing.

This same tendency, so apparent in the development of the early Church, is parallel to the struggle in the life of the individual Christian. Constant vigilance is necessary to keep one’s Christianity pure and virile. Only through regular periods of worship, regular reading of God’s word, and regular periods of private prayer, can the Christian expect to remain faithful. It was in this vein that the apostle Peter warned, “Be sober, be watchful; your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour.” (1 Pet. 5:8). But with our eye on Christ, and with his constant help, we continue to feel the upward pull of the challenge which he included in the sermon on the mount, in Matt. 5:48, “Ye therefore shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”