

THE DILEMMA

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on March 23, 1969 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

We have often observed the differences between people. No two people are alike and no two people see the things about them alike. It is not surprising, then, to note that people look at religion differently. For example, many people are long on Christian doctrine and short on living the Christian life. Others look at Christianity quite differently and are short on Christian doctrine and long on living the Christian life. They seek the opposite poles of Christianity. To make the matter worse, those who are long on doctrine are rather quick to disparage those who place a low estimate on doctrine. Contrariwise, those who are concerned about Christian living are quick to discount the church and all its doctrines. Oftentimes, it is a battle between “the letter of the law” and “the Spirit of Christ,” with each camp outspokenly critical of the other.

It is the intent of this message to point out that both doctrine and practical living have an essential place in Christianity. In fact, in the New Testament itself there is no distinction between doctrine on the one hand and practical living on the other. The scriptures refer to the different areas of emphasis equally as “commands” of the Lord. Both are emphasized; both are important.

It is man himself who has singled out one group of commands and called them doctrines, while referring to the other teachings of Christ as the Spirit of Christ. This is an unfortunate division, since the New Testament treats all of these teachings as an integral part of Christianity. In reference to all of his teachings, Christ said, “If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments ... He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself unto him.” (John 14:15, 21).

The Outward Sign

Just here I would like to remind you of one of the familiar stories in Christ’s life. In Mark 2:1-12, we read the story of a man with palsy, which means paralysis. The setting of the story is Capernaum, where Christ was teaching and performing miracles. On this particular occasion the house in which he was sitting was so crowded that it was not possible for anyone to enter. As a consequence the four men who were carrying their paralyzed friend went to the flat roof of the house and uncovered it so that they could let the sick man down inside.

When Jesus saw the man and realized the faith of those who had brought him, he said to the paralyzed man, “Son, thy sins are forgiven.” Some of the scribes sitting by reasoned in their hearts, “Why does this man thus speak? he blasphemeth: who can forgive sins but one, even God?” Jesus knowing the thoughts of their hearts, asked, “Which is easier, to say to the sick of the palsy, Thy sins are forgiven; or to say, Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath authority on earth to forgive sins (he saith to the sick of the palsy), I say unto thee, Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thy house.” The man did rise from his bed, was healed, and departed to his own house.

In telling this story ordinarily we point out that it was not possible for the people to see the forgiveness of the man’s sins. Since they questioned in their own hearts. Christ performed a visible miracle as an indication that he had also performed the invisible miracle of forgiving the man’s sins. The outward, visible miracle proved the inner, invisible miracle.

I would like to borrow this story from the second chapter of Mark and suggest it as a parallel to our study today. Is it not reasonable to believe that obedience to Christ’s commands of a doctrinal nature, as men make the division, is designed as an outward, visible evidence of an inner attitude? When our Lord commands us to confess him before men, or when he commands us to be baptized for the forgiveness of sins or when he teaches us that we should worship him in certain specified ways, or when he directs us to make the church conform to a certain pattern, is it not reasonable to believe that he is asking for overt, visible adherence to these commands as a demonstration that we have submitted our wills to his will? Are not these observable activities an evidence of a right attitude of heart toward the Lord? As signs of the right kind of inner attitude toward Christ, obedience to his every command takes on greater significance.

This whole subject can be stated in a different way. The average man believes that salvation is based entirely upon how good a man is. Is this true, according to the scriptures? Well, certainly it is true that those who are to be saved must be good, in the sense that they are endeavoring to the very best of their ability to leave off the evils of the world about them. There should be a clear-cut difference between the lives of God’s children and those who are yet in the world. However, this is not to say that men will be saved on the basis of their own goodness. No one can be good enough to be saved in and of himself. We are saved when we come to Christ and are cleansed by his blood. On this very point the apostle John wrote, “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanseth us from all sin.” (I John 1:7).

As one reads the scriptures he finds a passage in the 10th chapter of Acts which declares in unmistakable terms that salvation is not achieved by one's own personal goodness. The story is that of Cornelius, the Roman Centurion who was on occupation duty among the Jews in Palestine during the early days of the church. The story begins, "Now there was a certain man in Caesarea, Cornelius by name, a centurion of the band called the Italian band, a devout man, and one that feared God with all his house, who gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God always." We are deeply impressed with the four expressions that are used by the Holy Spirit in Luke's account of this story which indicate the quality of life which Cornelius lived. He was a devout man; he feared God with all his house; who gave much alms to the people, and prayed to God. We are deeply impressed with the four expressions that are used by the Holy Spirit in Luke's account of this story which indicate the quality of life which Cornelius lived. He was a devout man; he feared God with all his house; he gave much alms to the people; he prayed to God always. So far as his own life was concerned this man was a far better man than most of us. Yet, he was not saved because he had not been cleansed by the blood of Christ.

The story continues. "He saw in a vision openly, as it were about the ninth hour of the day, an angel of God coming in unto him, and saying to him, Cornelius. And he, fastening his eyes upon him, and being affrighted, said, What is it, Lord? And he said unto him, Thy prayers and thine alms are gone up for a memorial before God. And now send to Joppa, and fetch one Simon, who is surnamed Peter: he lodgeth with one Simon a tanner, whose house is by the seaside." At this point I should like to include a statement from the following chapter, Acts 11:14, which further explains why he needed to send for Peter "who shall speak unto thee words, whereby thou shalt be saved, thou and all thy house." "And when the angel that spake unto him was departed, he called two of his household-servants and a devout soldier of them that waited on him continually; and having rehearsed all things unto them, he sent them to Joppa." (Acts 10:1-8).

We pass by the account of the Lord's preparation of Peter for the making of this journey and resume the story after Peter had arrived in Joppa. "And Cornelius said, Four days ago, until this hour, I was keeping the ninth hour of prayer in my house; and behold, a man stood before me in white apparel, and saith, Cornelius, thy prayer is heard, and thine alms are had in remembrance in the sight of God. Send therefore to Joppa, and call unto thee Simon, who is surnamed Peter; he lodgeth in the house of Simon a tanner, by the seaside. Forthwith therefore I sent to thee; and thou hast well done that thou hast come. Now therefore we are all here present in the sight of God, to hear all things that have been commanded thee of the Lord." (Acts 10:30-33).

Peter's Sermon

At this point Peter began his great sermon, a sermon concerning Christ, "And Peter opened his mouth, and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons; but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is acceptable to him. The word which he sent unto the children of Israel, preaching good tidings of peace by Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all)--that saying ye yourselves know, which was published throughout all Judaea, beginning from Galilee, after the baptism which John preached; even Jesus of Nazareth, how God anointed him with the Holy Spirit and with power; who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all things which he did both in the country of the Jews, and in Jerusalem; whom also they slew, hanging him on a tree. Him God raised up the third day, and gave him to be made manifest, not to all the people, but unto witnesses that were chosen before God, even to us, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he charged us to preach unto the people, and to testify that this is he who is ordained of God to be the Judge of the living and the dead. To him bear all the prophets witness, that through his name everyone that believeth on him shall receive remission of sins." (Acts 10:34-43).

Following this sermon which set forth the basic principles of Christ's coming to the earth, the Holy Spirit indicated God's endorsement of Peter's preaching to Gentiles on this occasion. Our text then continues, "Can any man forbid the water, that these should not be baptized, who have received the Holy Spirit as well as we? And he commanded them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then prayed they him to tarry certain days." (Acts 10:47-48). The emphasis of this story is very plain. Here was one of the best men who ever lived, yet he was not saved until he came in contact with Christ his Savior. Goodness alone is not sufficient to receive salvation. Man in himself has no power to purchase his redemption from sin. This is only possible through the blood of Christ. Christ is our Redeemer. It is through his death that we have justification. It is through him that the atonement comes. Outside of Christ there is no hope. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no one cometh unto the Father but by me," said our Lord. (John 14:16).

All aspects of Christianity are important. This is certainly true of feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick, and all other aspects of daily, Christian living. These matters will be mentioned at the final judgment, as indicated in Matt. 25:31-46). They are crucially important. Likewise, those things that have to do with becoming a Christian are vitally important. Confession of Christ and baptism are so important that Jesus once said, "Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to the whole creation. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that disbelieveth shall be condemned." (Mark 16:15-16). While men call some of these commands doctrinal and others practical in nature, there is no such distinction among the commandments in the scriptures. Rather, Jesus included them all when he said, "If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments." (John 14:15). Let us, therefore, neglect neither group. Rather, let us include all of Christ's commands in our faith and practice. Let us make our salvation as sure as we can.

In this whole matter under discussion I believe we can see a clear-cut dilemma. One horn is the position of doctrine only. This almost exclusive emphasis upon the doctrinal teachings of Christ is the same mistaken position occupied by the Pharisees of Jesus' day. They were so concerned about tithing mint, anise and cummin, that they left undone the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy and faith. Jesus called them blind guides "that strain out the gnat, and swallow the camel!" (Matt. 23:23-24). Theirs was only a partial understanding of God's teaching.

The other horn of the dilemma is that occupied by those who would bypass everything in Christianity of a doctrinal nature and hold on only to those moral and ethical principles of daily living. They are endeavoring to be Christians, yet without Christ. They have no realization of the need of Christ's atoning blood, nor of any of the commandments which bring one into a relationship with Christ where his cleansing power can be felt. The dilemma, then, places at opposite extremes those who see only the external commands and those who see only the practical deeds. Neither is enough. Neither is complete Christianity. Rather, both are needed and without both Christianity is lop-sided and incomplete.

Finally, let us observe again that obedience to the commands of Christ is an outward evidence of the inner acceptance of Christ as Lord. The commandments, we firmly believe, have significance within themselves, but they also have an even deeper significance in that they are signs of inner attitudes. May the day come when all of us can see all of Christianity. May our own individual differences and individual preferences some day be lost in that perfect completeness which was found in Christ himself. He went about doing good, yet we remember that he also was baptized. Let us learn that if we would truly follow our Lord, no partial Christianity will do.