

WHAT THINK YE OF CHRIST?

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on March 29, 1964 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

During his lifetime Jesus asked many questions. He also provided answers to many questions. Of all the questions that he asked none is more significant than the one he asked his disciples when he came into the parts of Caesarea Philippi, who do men say that the Son of man is?" (Matt. 16:13). The same question in slightly different words was asked on another occasion of a group of the Pharisees, "What think ye of the Christ? Whose Son is he?" (Matt. 22:42). This question was of importance to the disciples and to the Pharisees of old, but it is also vitally important to those of us who live today. In fact, no question in the history of the world is so important, for the answer that man gives to this question will determine where he spends eternity.

Many answers have been given to the question, "What think ye of the Christ? Whose Son is he?" Several years ago when we were in Jerusalem we had a Jewish guide who proved to be very congenial and friendly as well as competent in showing us the places of interest. After having spent several days with him, we felt that we knew him well enough to ask him what he thought of Christ. Knowing our views, he was somewhat hesitant at first, but eventually he made it very clear that he thought of him as an imposter. He even went so far as to blame him, more than any other one man, for the evil plight of the Jewish nation. No doubt his view was extreme, though there are millions of others who share the view that Christ was merely a man. At the opposite extreme there are those of us who confidently believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. Between these two views are many shades of opinion concerning Jesus. Some think of him as one of the greatest teachers of all time, but still only human. Others think of him as a great prophet, declaring the will of God, but not divine. All agree that he has been the most influential figure in the history of the world.

Many Questions

Was he really divine? Was he really the Son of God? Was he born of a virgin? What do you think of his early life? What do you think of his ministry? What do you think of his purpose in coming to the earth? What do you think of him as a teacher? What do you think of him as a physician? What do you think of him as a comforter? What do you think of his death? Do you believe that he is living still? Do you believe that he is preparing heavenly mansions for those who follow him? Do you believe in his church?

On what basis is it possible to determine the answers to these questions? The only basis that I know is in terms of the record of how he lived, based upon the testimony of those who knew him face to face. Accordingly, I should like to call as witnesses the many of his own generation who knew him intimately and to hear from the lips of each his testimony concerning Christ. Let us imagine that you are a juror and that you sit in a jury box listening intently as each of the witnesses gives his testimony in answer to the question, "What think ye of Christ?"

His Enemies Speak

First, in order to be absolutely fair, we shall call as witnesses those who were his enemies. On one occasion the chief priests sent the temple officers to arrest him. The officers made the mistake of listening for a time to the things that Jesus was saying to the multitude. They were so impressed that they could not bring themselves to arrest a man who spoke in such a manner. Instead they returned to the chief priests empty handed. Immediately they were asked, "Why did ye not bring him?" Their only answer was, "Never man so spake." (John 7:45-46).

Next, let us call the bitterest of his enemies, the Pharisees. What do these enemies of Christ have to say of him? On one occasion they leveled at him the charge, "This man receiveth sinners, and eateth with them." (Luke 15:2). Much later, while he was hanging on the cross, they said, "He saved others; himself he cannot save." (Matt. 27:42). One wonders: is either of these a charge so serious as to merit a man's condemnation and crucifixion?

High Priest and Governor

But let us listen to the testimony of Caiphias, high priest at the time of the crucifixion, and the one man who more than any other called for Christ's death. During the examination of Christ by this ruler he was asked the question, "Tell us whether thou art the Christ, the Son of God. Then, Jesus said unto him, Thou hast said: nevertheless I say unto you, henceforth ye shall see the Son of man sitting at the right hand of power and coming on the clouds of heaven." At that point the high priest rent his garments saying, "He hath spoken blasphemy." (Matt. 26:63-65). The only serious charge that Caiphias could bring against Christ was that he had claimed to be the Son of God, which is no charge at all if it proves to be true. We believe that the evidence of Christ's life, his teachings and his miracles, including his resurrection, gives us every reason to believe that Christ was the one who was correct and that Caiphias was wrong.

Let us call as our next witness the Roman governor, who was stationed in Palestine during the critical time of Christ's life. After full and complete examination, Pilate said, "I find no fault in this man." (Luke 23:4). We might also mention the testimony of the wife of

Pilate, who said, "Have thou nothing to do with that righteous man; for I have suffered many things this day in a dream because of him." (Matt. 27:19).

Judas

Let us turn next to one of the men who knew Jesus most intimately and whose behavior is the most puzzling of all those connected with Christ. Judas Iscariot, who had been one of the twelve apostles for almost the entire public ministry of Jesus, betrayed him in the garden with a hypocritical kiss. Was this his final verdict, or was there another? After Judas had seen Christ arrested, seen him given the semblance of a trial and condemned to the cross, Judas' conscience smote him. He returned the thirty pieces of silver which he had received for the betrayal of the Lord, and went out into a field and hanged himself. But just before he had taken his own life, he made the significant statement "I have sinned in that I have betrayed innocent blood." (Matt. 27:4).

The Roman centurion who was charged with the responsibility of doing the actual crucifying of the Lord was so impressed by the phenomena which accompanied the death of Christ on the cross that he uttered, "Truly this was the Son of God." (Matt. 27:54). Even one of the thieves who was crucified with Jesus was so impressed that he said, "This man hath done nothing amiss." (Luke 23:41). As our last witness from among the enemies of Christ we might well call upon the devils themselves, who said, "Jesus, thou Son of the most high God." (Luke 8:28). The testimony thus far is in every case from one who had opposed Christ and who counted himself as an enemy of Christ. Their testimony, since it is to the glory of the Lord, is most significant.

His Friends Speak

Now let us turn to those who knew him even more intimately, those who were his friends and disciples. The first witness that we shall call will be John the Baptist, the forerunner and announcer of the messiah. Please bear in mind, however, that John had much to lose so far as the things of the world are concerned, by proclaiming Jesus to be the Messiah. Even though it meant his own eclipse, and the over-night fading of his tremendous popularity, he said, "Behold, the lamb of God, that taketh away the sin of the world." (John 1:29). He also said, "He must increase, but I must decrease." (John 3:30).

As our next witness we call Simon Peter, who in the night of the betrayal, denied that he knew the Lord. After the resurrection and after the appearance to the disciples, Peter preached the great sermon on Pentecost in which he said, "God hath made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom ye crucified." (Acts 2:36).

When the apostle John, many years after Christ's death, came to write his account of the life of Christ, he began it with the words, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God ... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father), full of grace and truth." (John 1:1,14).

Doubting Thomas

The apostle Thomas had been absent on the first day of the week after Christ's crucifixion when Jesus made his appearance to the ten apostles. When they had told him of the resurrection and the appearance of Christ he did not believe, but one week later when he was present at the time of Christ's repeat appearance, he exclaimed, "My Lord and my God." (John 20:28).

From among those who were not intimately associated with Jesus, we call as witnesses the men of Decapolis. Jesus had come into their territory, east of the sea of Galilee, had preached and worked miracles, and then had departed. Their verdict: "He hath done all things well." (Mark. 7:37).

After some years Saul of Tarsus was changed from a persecuter of Christians into the great apostle to the Gentiles. So deep was his conversion that he said, "I suffered the loss of all things, and do account them but refuse, that I may gain Christ." (Phil. 3:8). In writing to the young preacher, Timothy, he said further, "I know him whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that he is able to guard that which I have committed unto him against that day." (II Tim. 1:12).

Let us next call the angels of heaven who at the birth of Christ announced to the world, "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people: for there is born to you this day in the city of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord." (Luke 2:10-11). In the final book of the Bible the redeemed saints of all ages cry, "Worthy is the Lamb that hath been slain to receive the power, and riches, and wisdom, and might, and honor, and glory, and blessings." (Rev. 5:12).

God Speaks

Finally, let us hear the testimony of our heavenly Father, God himself: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Matt. 3:17). These words were spoken at the time when Jesus was baptized by John at Jordan. Later, when Jesus was transfigured before three of his disciples, the voice of God again spoke from the clouds of heaven, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased; hear ye him." (Matt. 17:5).

We have listened to the testimony of the enemies of Christ, who in the final analysis were able to say nothing evil against him, but only that which redounds to his honor. Even more significantly we have listened to the testimony of those men who were his intimate disciples and followers. They gave their lives as martyrs in order to testify that Jesus was raised from the dead and that his miracles were genuine. These men were willing to sacrifice reputation, goods, and life itself rather than to abandon their conviction that Jesus was the Son of God. From the evidence, and the evidence alone, it is our conviction that the divinity of Christ is established by the facts. The testimony of his contemporaries and the influence which his life had upon his own generation and subsequent generations is evidence that he was not a mere man.

Conclusion

Salvation depends upon our believing that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. After Philip preached to the Ethiopian concerning Christ, when the Ethiopian was ready to become a Christian, his ability to do so hinged upon only one consideration, "If thou believest with all thy heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." The preacher then commanded the chariot to stand still. And they both went down into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him." (Acts 8:37-38). Our salvation depends upon the belief that Jesus is divine, for out of that belief come the additional acts of obedience that God requires in order to pardon us of our sins and save us eternally.

We call upon you now to make known your faith in Christ and to obey his commandments that you may live with him eternally.