

A LOOK AT THE CHURCH ON ITS BIRTHDAY

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on May 25, 1969 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Nineteen hundred thirty-nine years ago today the church began. This is the birthday of the church. We can know with some degree of exactness both when the church began and where it began. The New Testament tells us that the church had its beginning in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost. Pentecost, one of the three great annual Jewish feast days, always fell fifty days after Passover. Passover always came on the first Sabbath after the first full moon after the Vernal Equinox. Using the same method used by the Jews we discover that this year Passover falls on April 5 and Pentecost on May 25. Since the church began in A.D. 30, today is the 1939th birthday of the church,

Birthdays are important. They encourage us to pause and look back over the lifetime of a person or of an institution. Today is a good time to look back over the long history of the church and also to note present trends. Although our look must be brief, we trust it can be profitable.

Five Major Aspects of History

There are five major aspects of the history of the church which we wish to consider. First, the church has been the means through which many souls have been saved. Second, the church has had an uplifting effect upon society wherever it has gone. Third, the church has been marked by numerous departures from the original faith: in church government, in how one becomes a Christian, and in how one worships. Fourth, the church has been marred by costly divisions. Finally, the church has moved in the direction of big buildings, elaborate organization, and paid professional leadership. Let us note each of these developments carefully..

Evaluation

The church has been the means through which many souls have been saved. This is rather thrilling to contemplate, when one remembers that there were three thousand baptized on Pentecost and multitudes more added immediately. Through the centuries there must have been millions whose eternal destiny was changed by their knowledge of Christ and his church. The emphasis on evangelism is to be found on almost every page of the New Testament. Through the centuries, however, this spirit of evangelism has been lost in many church groups and in the lives of many individuals who intend to be followers of Christ. Some churches are known as "non-evangelical." They are not concerned with saving lost souls. Their conception of Christianity is that it is primarily centered in this world and therefore they devote their primary concern to social betterment.

We would remind such groups that Christ's final recorded words were, "Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." (Matt. 28:19-20). These words were true 1900 years ago; they are true today. We would also remember that Jesus said at another time, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no one cometh unto the Father, but by me." (John 14:6). Salvation is only in Christ, and this means that Christ must be preached everywhere, to all men, through all time. When the church fails to be evangelistic it has failed.

The church has had an uplifting effect upon society wherever it has gone. Through the centuries it has caused men and communities to become more honest, more virtuous, and more concerned about the needs of mankind. The most beneficial influence that the world has ever had is the influence of Christ, manifest through his church, his faithful followers. But, today, there are many who feel that the influence of the church is no longer felt in the modern world. Christianity has no real significance, they say, in determining the attitudes and patterns of action of modern man. This is the charge. With it we are in at least some degree of agreement. The church often does not significantly influence the course of individual behavior nor of human affairs in general. Surely Christians need to be more active in bringing Christ and his ethics into every decision-making situation.

There is a major difference of judgment about the method by which the church is to be influential in the world. There are some who favor large spectacular, government-like moves. These must be nationally recognizable, promoted by the techniques of Madison Avenue and widely proclaimed by press, radio and television. Others of us feel that a quiet, individual influence is the means through which Christianity is to influence the world. It is to affect mankind as leaven affects a baker's bread. In fact, Jesus used that very example on one occasion. In Matt. 13 he told the story of the leaven which leavened three measures of meal. It is the method suggested in Matt. 5:16 where Jesus says, "Even so let your light shine before men; that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven." It is implied in Gal. 6:10 where we read, "So then, as we have opportunity, let us work that which is good toward all men, and especially toward them that are of the household of the faith." Influence, yes, but a quiet, permanent, growing kind of influence on the daily lives of those about us.

The church has been marked by numerous departures from the original faith: in church government, in how one becomes a Christian, and in how one is to worship. The New Testament warns in no uncertain terms of the danger and the tragedy of apostasy. Paul wrote, "Though we, or an angel from heaven, should preach unto you any gospel other than that which we preached unto you, let him be anathema. As we have said before, so say I now again, If any man preacheth unto you any gospel other than that which ye received, let him be anathema." (Gal. 1:8-9). Similarly, John wrote, "Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God: he that abideth in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and the Son." (II John 9). In II Tim. 3:16-17, Paul shows the complete adequacy of the scriptures. "Every scripture inspired of God is also profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for instruction which is in righteousness: that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work."

Through the centuries followers of Christ have often strayed away from the original path. In each case God provided the instrumentality by which they could return to the right road. The inspired word of God is the means of renewal. If men will only read and heed the message of the Bible they can always get back on the right path. This idea of restoration is extremely important. By the very nature of man it is likely that he will stray away from that which is true from time to time. With an inspired guide book he has the means of being restored to that which is right. Our responsibility is to use the scriptures as the means of renewal and restoration.

The church has been marred by costly divisions. We remember the Lord's fervent prayer on the night of his betrayal, "Neither for these only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their word; that they all may be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us: that the world may believe that thou didst send me." (John 17:20-21). The same emphasis is found in the writing of the apostle Paul, "Now I beseech you, brethren, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment." (I Cor. 1:10). It is the Lord's will that all his followers be united. In our day there is a widespread desire for unity and much talk about unity. There is much written on the subject. The "ecumenical movement" is very popular. However, there is at least one major problem.

William S. Banowsky, writing in a recent issue of the *20th Century Christian*, has said, "A recent study conducted by the Survey Research Center of the University of California, Berkeley, attests that many members of American Protestant denominations disbelieve the deity of Christ. To be quite specific, 23% of the Congregationalists, 24% of the Methodists, and 16% of the Episcopalians do not believe that Jesus is the divine Son of God. Moreover, 43% of all Protestants do not believe that Christ was born of a virgin. In addition, 72% of the Congregationalists, 63% of the Methodists, 59% of the Episcopalians, 42% of the Presbyterians, 50% of the Disciples of Christ, and the American Baptists, and 31% of the American Lutherans do not believe that Christ ever performed a miracle. Finally, 35% of Protestants do not believe Christ's promise of an eternal life." Then a few moments later he concluded, "What does all this mean? Simply, that the ecumenical movement is doomed before it starts if the churches most dedicated to it fail to reverence the Lordship of Christ. It was Christ who said, 'Upon this rock I will build my church.'" How true. Unless those who profess to be followers of Christ and who urgently appeal for unity can agree upon the divinity of Christ there is little hope that the ecumenical movement can succeed. The Bible is the only real basis for unity. Only when we believe the Bible to be the inspired word of God and when we are willing to accept its teaching concerning Christ and his church is there any ground upon which unity can be achieved.

The church has moved in the direction of big buildings, elaborate organization and paid professional leadership. The trend of our day is solidly away from each of these. There is a widespread movement in America today in protest against cold artificial ritual, against impersonal bigness, and against the lack of involvement which is so often present in today's churches. A large segment of Christ believing Americans objects to relegating religion to a Sunday morning time slot, to a specific building and to a paid professional leadership. Within many of the large denominations there are movements toward the "house church" and the "under ground church." These movements have a strong devotional element in them. Normally, these home groups engage together in the study of the Bible and in prayer. Finding the denominational framework and the big buildings with their professional leaders somewhat barren, groups are meeting in apartments and homes in the search for a more meaningful participation. Dr. Daniel A. Polling has recently written a new book entitled *The Last Years of the Church*. He explains that by the last days he means the end of the formal, organized type of church. He further explains that religion has been moving away from the church buildings and has become more fluid and unorganized. People go to church less often and join organized churches less frequently than before.

Still another facet in this general trend away from the big historical churches is the fact that fewer and fewer men want to join the professional clergy. Protestant seminaries, as well as the training schools for the Catholic clergy, have been saying for several years that there is a shortage of men. It seems that the modern young American does not wish to become a member of the professional clergy.

Both this turning away from the profession of the clergy and the movement toward devotional Bible study and prayer in homes may be a movement back toward the emphasis of the New Testament. In the early church we do not find the distinction between clergy and laity that men have developed down through the centuries. Rather, Christians were all on the same level, with various ones having different talents and therefore doing different works. No one group was above another nor better than another. On his second missionary journey the apostle Paul was sometimes supported by the churches that had sent him out and at other times he "made tents," (Acts 18:3) in order to support himself. While it is not wrong or unscriptural for a congregation to support a preacher or an elder in order that he may give his full time to religious work, it is wrong if it is done with the idea of paying someone else to do one's

Christian work. It appears that present trends may mean that some pulpits will be filled with men who earn their living at other work and then preach because they are deeply committed to Christ. In a sense this is reminiscent of the New Testament.

The meetings for study and prayer in homes are also reminiscent of the early days of the church. It is in small groups like this that Christians could really carry out James' instructions, "Confess therefore your sins one to another, and pray one for another that ye may be healed. (James 5:16). As a matter of fact when one examines the activities of the New Testament church he finds indications that there were large meetings in congregations such as the Jerusalem and Antioch churches, in which general teaching was done and worship was carried on. Then, there are implications that there were also many other smaller meetings in homes and other places where Christians discussed the faith., sang hymns and prayed to God. Such a combination seems to be what is needed today. Not the big public meetings only, but also Bible study and devotional meetings in families and in small groups of Christians. Each contributes to the other. The public worship and the private devotional meeting compliment each other.

Conclusion

Our brief survey of some of the trends and developments during the 19 century history of the church is only a suggestion and only a beginning. Perhaps it will elicit further thought and discussion of some of these matters, with the hopeful result that wise decisions will be made in a time in which religion is changing rapidly all about us. During past years some have been willing to have churchanity without Christ. This is tragic. Others have seemed willing to have Christianity without the church. This is impossible, for when one accepts Christ he must accept Christ's teachings relative to his church. Let us return to the complete New Testament pattern in all matters.

I would give my life for the church. I believe that there are thousands of other Christians who also love the church and would be willing to give their lives for it. Christ loved it, and Christ did give his life for it. Let us never disparage or discount the church. It is the Lord's institution for the saving of mankind. The church is his body. The church is his kingdom. The church is his family. All of these figures show the important, vital role that the church is to play. Let us love it and help it to be in our time what the Lord wants it to be. Our invitation is in terms of Christ, but it also involves his church. Come to Christ. Let him add you to his church.