

BEAUTIFUL SIMPLICITY IN CHRIST

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on June 1, 1969 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

All of us are very much aware of the complexity of our modern age. Books, journals and technical papers constantly tell us of unbelievably complex and sophisticated systems which man has developed. We are still a little unbelieving concerning rockets to the moon. We are amazed by the field of electronics, which is so precise in its measurements that it can divide a second into thousands of parts. The realms of communication and transportation are marvels to behold. No area is more impressive to us than the area of medical science in its recently achieved body transplants. In recent months I have sat by the bedside of a man whose kidney transplant gave him a new lease on life. In recent days I have shared the joy with one of our own members of the return of health through the implanting of a pacemaker to stimulate his heart. We are both thrilled and confused by the developments in science and technology. Einstein's theory of relativity likewise still baffles most of us. The intricacies and complexities of our modern world are constantly before us.

Even religion often seems to be complicated. There are so many different theories and so many different hypotheses about various phases of religion. Those who do graduate work in religion are laced with theoretical explanations about almost every aspect of religion. The documentary hypothesis gives an elaborate explanation of the origin of the Old Testament. Form Criticism gives an equally elaborate explanation of the origin of the gospels. The churches have myriads of different doctrines and different practices. The developments through nineteen centuries of church history are intricate and difficult of explanation. The student of religion is often confused by conflicting theories and variant practices.

But when one looks for it there is a beautiful simplicity in Christ. He is free of the conflicts and complexities of so much of the world about us. His message is profound in its significance, yet simple in its statement. There is a clarity about his ethics and an understandability about his plan for man which refresh the perplexed modern mind.

Christ's Teachings

Christ's teachings are relatively simple. For example, in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew he told a number of simple stories which have profound spiritual meanings. He began with the story of a sower who went forth to sow. How easy it is to visualize this ancient hypothetical farmer as he casts seed broadcast, with some falling upon the hard pathway, some among the thorns, some on rocky ground, and some in good rich soil. How easy it is to get the meaning of Christ's story of the mustard seed, which when planted grew up to be a sizable tree. The meaning of the story of the pearl of great price is immediately obvious. The same meaning is found in the story of the hidden treasure. Christ's message there is simply that when man finds the church he is to give up whatever is required in order to possess this eternal, spiritual treasure. All of these stories are instantly clear and deeply meaningful. How simply and yet how profoundly Christ taught.

On another occasion a scribe came to Jesus and asked the question, "What commandment is the first of all?" He was asking which of the commands in Moses' Law was the most important. One scholar has suggested that there are 660 different laws in Moses' list. To name the most important among so many was a task of sizable proportions, but Jesus responded seemingly without hesitation. He went back to Deut. 6:4-6 and quoted this summary statement from the law: "The first is, 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." He then went on to add another. The second is this, as he quoted from Lev. 19:18, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:28-31). How simple he made it: love God with everything that is in you; love your neighbor as yourself.

All the other command in the New Testament simply explain and elaborate these two commandments. The other rules of Christianity are man's guides to let him know how to love God and his neighbor.

How To Be Saved

How to be saved is relatively simple. At least, man's part in salvation is relatively simple. God and Christ have already done the complicated, difficult part. Through the love of God and the Sacrifice of Christ the atonement has been achieved for all men who will accept it. Redemption, justification, and forgiveness have been made available for man. As the apostle Paul wrote in Eph. 2:8-9, "By grace have ye been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, that no man should glory." The providing of pardon through God's grace is the intricate, complicated, difficult part of salvation.

Man's part is relatively simple. It begins with his hearing the gospel of Christ. To this end the final recorded words of the Lord before he left the earth were these, "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). The apostles and other early preachers immediately began to scatter throughout the populated earth telling the story of Jesus to everyone who would listen. This was to continue throughout all mankind until the end of history.

When men hear this good news concerning Christ, the Savior, they must respond by believing. In John 3:16 Jesus explained, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life.”

Believing leads man to the decision to turn away from sin and evil and toward Christ and righteousness. On Mars Hill in Athens the apostle Paul preached, “The times of ignorance therefore God overlooked: but now he commandeth men that they should all everywhere repent.” (Acts 17:30).

After this change of will in regard to sin, man must make known his faith in Christ in some way. Jesus said, “Everyone therefore who shall confess me before men, him will I also confess before my Father who is in heaven. But whosoever shall deny me before men, him will I also deny before my Father who is in heaven.” (Matt. 10:32-33).

The final act in becoming a child of God is baptism. On Pentecost, when Peter had preached to the multitude, and many had been pricked in their hearts with the message of the crucified Savior, they asked, “Brethren, what shall we do?” Immediately Peter replied, “Repent ye, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins; and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:37-38). Later in the same book of Acts, the necessity of baptism is clearly taught in the case of the conversion of Saul of Tarsus. After this conscientious man had believed in Christ as the Savior for three days, and had spent those days in earnest fasting and prayer, the Lord sent Ananias to tell him what he should do to be saved. Ananias came and said, “And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on his name.” (Acts 22:16). Man’s part in salvation is relatively simple. It consists of hearing the gospel, believing in Christ as the divine Son of God, repenting of sin, confessing faith in Christ, and being baptized for the forgiveness of sins. At that point God adds the obedient believer to his church. (Acts 2:47).

In a very real sense man’s part in salvation can be compared to a man who finds himself outdoors on a dark and moonless night. In contrast to his dark surroundings, there is a nearby building inside of which there is brilliant light. The man is invited to come out of the darkness into the lighted room. He accepts the invitation and does so. In coming into the light, he does not erect the building, he does not design and install its electrical system, he does not generate the electricity and bring it to the building, for all of these things have been provided freely for him. All he does is accept the invitation and move into the lighted room. Similarly in salvation, man does not provide the means of his salvation, but merely accepts the free gift through his obedience to the simple conditions of pardon which the Lord has laid down. His obedient faith reaches out to accept the gift of God’s grace.

How To Worship

How to worship is relatively simple. In essence it is simply, “Love the Lord and let him know.” Letting the Lord know of our love for him is to be done through five avenues of worship outlined in the New Testament. We discover that the early Christians were guided to sing. Paul’s message is, “speaking one to another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord.” (Eph. 5:19). Singing is one of the avenues of Christian worship.

Immediately after the church began on Pentecost, we are told that “They continued stedfastly in the apostles, teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers.” (Acts 2:42). In this one sentence there are three of the avenues of Christian worship: the apostles’ teaching, or study of God’s inspired word; the eating of the Lord’s Supper; and prayer.

In addition to these four, there is one other avenue of Christian worship: giving of one’s means, Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “Upon the first day of the week let each one of you lay by him in store, as he may prosper, that no collections be made when I come.” (I Cor. 16:2). With genuine love and admiration in his heart, man offers his worship to God through singing, through study, through the eating of the Lord’s Supper, through prayer and through giving of his resources.

How To Govern

How to govern the church is relatively simple. Whenever a group of Christians meet together regularly for worship a congregation is formed. This congregation then seeks out from among its own numbers several older men who are mature Christians and then names them to be its elders or bishops. The qualifications to guide these choices are set forth in I Tim. 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9. There are younger men who serve under the elders as special servants. They are known as deacons. In addition, there are teachers, evangelists and members who are directed in their Christian activities by these older, mature Christian men who have been named to be elders. This organization is relatively simple, yet it works efficiently on every economic and social level of society and even in different national groups. It is a marvelously flexible, but beautifully effective method of governing the Lord’s church. Each eldership is, of course, under the direction of the inspired word of God, as given by Christ and the apostles.

The Christian Life

The Christian life is a relatively simple life. The goals are clear and distinct. This means that the making of life's many decisions is made much easier. With distinct goals and clear guidelines to assist him, the Christian has a much easier time in making his decisions than the man who goes it alone. In addition, the Christian life is an uncluttered life. It is free from many of the pressures and burdens that the lives of others often accumulate. The simpler Christian life provides time to enjoy one's family, savoring the rich relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, brothers and sisters. The Christ guided life appreciates and enjoys rich relationships with friends. In fact, these relationships are like that of brother and sister. There is also time and encouragement to appreciate the beauties of nature, remembering that "every good gift" has been provided by a loving Father for his deeply loved children. The Christian's life moves at a slower pace, enjoying all of the good things that this world has to offer and being relatively free from the tensions and burdens that sin brings upon man.

Conclusion

Christianity is for all men; the rich and the poor, the old and the young, the educated and the uneducated, and for all nationalities of all time. There a beautiful simplicity in Christ.