

THE MAN AND THE PLAN

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on August 26, 1962 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

We have often heard it said, "No two people are alike." This is true in many ways. Some are tall; some are short. Some are old; some are young. Some are quick of movement; some are slow of movement. The differences are almost infinite and the most obvious of these are in the physical realm.

Of far greater significance, however, are the differences that exist among men in the realm of thinking--their attitudes, their views of life, their temperaments. In the religious work, particularly, where there are many churches with many different doctrines and practices, do we see the effect of the different ways in which men think and feel. Let us notice one particular area in which there are wide differences of thinking.

Emphasis: The Person of Christ

There are those who emphasize the person of Christ to the exclusion of almost everything else. They are very pious and very spiritual. They have highly emotionalized feelings, almost ecstatic feelings, about the Lord. Some even go so far as to feel that they see him and hear him from time to time in dreams and visions. Jesus is very real and very near.

The tragedy comes in the fact that these people often have a complete lack of concern for the doctrines of Christianity--the nature of the church, how to become a Christian, and how to worship. In their highly emotionalized feelings concerning Christ they somehow fail to have any real concern even for the things which Christ taught. One is reminded of Jesus' statement, "This people honoreth me with their lips; but their heart is far from me. But in vain do they worship me, teaching for their doctrines the precepts of men." (Matt. 15:8-9).

Like the pendulum of a clock, men have a way of going to extremes. We have just noticed one extreme, now let us go to the opposite swing of the pendulum and notice another extreme.

Emphasis: The Doctrinal Side

There are those who emphasize the doctrinal side of Christianity to the exclusion of almost anything else. Their primary emphasis is upon the "plan of salvation." Christianity, to them, seems to consist of faith, repentance, confession, and baptism, plus the eating of the Lord's Supper every Sunday. The doctrines of Christianity loom large, but unfortunately the Lord himself is pushed so far into the background that there is little thought or concern for him.

This approach to Christianity is as mistaken as is the other extreme. This is a threadbare kind of Christianity. Those who are limited to first principles A-B-C-Deians. They have not yet matured. They do not yet know the fullness and the richness of Christianity. K. C. Moser's book, *The Way of Salvation*, shows the shallowness of such an approach to Christianity.

These people seem never to have heard of grace. Salvation becomes something they earn for themselves. This type of religion is akin to the "merit works salvation" that appears to be so dominant in Catholicism. Those who hold this view need to read Ephesians 2:8-9, "For 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." Christ's statement in Luke 17:10 also needs to be heard, "Even so ye also, when ye shall have done all the things that are commanded you, say, We are unprofitable servants; we have done that which it was our duty to do."

Still another passage that needs to be considered is Hebrews 5:12-6:3, "For when by reason of the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need again that someone teach you the rudiments of the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of solid food. For everyone that partaketh of milk is without experience of the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food is for full-grown men, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern good and evil. Wherefore leaving the doctrine of the first principles of Christ, let us press on to perfection; not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, of the teaching of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this will we do, if God permit."

Unfortunately, those whose Christianity centers almost exclusively in the person of Christ look across at their religious friends who emphasize doctrines and are repelled by their "legalism." This causes them to turn even more sharply away from the doctrines of Christ and to emphasize even more exclusively the deep, spiritual feelings which they admire so much. Similarly, those who have already emphasized Christian doctrines with scant attention to the Lord himself, look across at those who are careless about doctrine and consider them "liberal" and "soft." Each group is pushed further toward its own extreme by the extreme emphasis of the other groups.

Both Views--But Neither Extreme

As we evaluate these two extremes, we would begin with the fact that Christ is the heart and center of Christianity. The church is important only because of its relationship to Christ. Baptism is meaningful only because Jesus commanded it, and because it exemplifies his burial and resurrection. The Lord's supper has significance only because it is part of the will of Christ for his followers and because it commemorates the Lord's death for the salvation of men. So it is with every other doctrine or practice of Christianity. Christ is first. Everything else is important only as it relates to Christ and as it is a part of his will.

But the fact is that Christ did have a plan or way of salvation. It all began with God's limitless, unconditional love for mankind, which he manifest in the sending of the Lord to earth. This is God's limitless grace. Man was lost and could not save himself. God through Christ has provided the way of escape. It is a free gift from God, never merited, never earned. But it is also true that man must meet the simple conditions laid down by the Lord in order to receive the gift. Those God-given conditions are man's side of the "plan of salvation." God's part the big part; man's part is insignificant by comparison. However, it is none the less necessary if man is to be saved. Faith, repentance, confession, baptism, and the living of a faithful Christian life of service and worship are necessary for salvation. This is not man's plan, for man cannot save himself, but this is a part of God's plan for the saving of men.

It is utterly impossible to preach Christ without preaching his plan. For example, notice Christ's own statement to Nicodemus, "Verily, Verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God." (John 3:5). Here Christ himself is teaching the plan by which man is to be saved. It involves baptism in water and the Spirit. Similarly, when Christ spoke the great commission to his apostles, he was preaching the plan, "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).

On Pentecost Sunday, when the church began, the apostle Peter preached the first full gospel sermon of the Christian era. It was a dynamic sermon preeminent about Christ. However, after preaching of Jesus as the Lord and Savior, Peter then pointed the people to the way or plan which God had provided for their salvation in these words, "And Peter said unto them, 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 2:38). Preaching Christ inevitably involves his plan.

In still another example, we find the evangelist Philip riding in the chariot by the side of the Ethiopian nobleman. Acts 8:35f says, "And Philip opened his mouth, and beginning from this scripture, preached unto him Jesus." Then the next sentence reads, "And as they went on their way, they came to a certain water; and the eunuch said, Behold, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? And Philip said, If thou believest with all thy heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they both went down into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him." Notice that Philip "preached unto him Jesus" and that the man inquired about baptism after hearing Jesus preached. Obviously, the preaching of Christ includes his instructions about how to become a Christian. Preaching Christ includes preaching Christ's way of salvation.

To the Corinthians, the apostle Paul wrote, "For I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified." (I Cor. 2:2). Notice, however, that the same apostle who made this statement also wrote Romans 6:3-5, which emphasizes baptism, "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 might also 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."

The same apostle also wrote, "If thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord, and shall believe in thy heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved: for with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation." (Romans 10:9-10).

It was in Galatians 3:26-27, however, that Paul placed his strongest emphasis upon the "plan of salvation." It was there that he said, "For ye are all sons of God, through faith, in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ did put on Christ." Obviously, the apostle who dedicated himself to know nothing save Jesus Christ and him crucified also preached the Lord's plan of salvation. Again we say, it is utterly impossible to preach Christ without preaching his plan. It is not Christ or the plan, but rather Christ and the plan.

Conclusion

On the one hand, the error is in divorcing Christ's plan from Christ himself. The error is in preaching the church, or worship, or conversion, or anything else apart from Christ. Christ is the heart and center of Christianity and it is he who makes everything else meaningful. On the other hand, the error is in divorcing Christ from the commandments which he taught. Jesus himself said, "If ye love me ye will keep my commandments." (John 14:15). One's love for Christ can only be demonstrated by obedience to his every

command. May we fully realize the centrality of Christ and may he become the very center of our lives. May we feel his presence everywhere we go in everything that we do, for it is only then that we can be truly Christ-centered. May we fully realize the love of God which was manifest in Christ. May we realize our own insignificance and the utter inability of any works that man can do to earn salvation. May we also become fully aware of the teachings of our God and may we humbly submit to every commandment which he and our Lord have given. Through living obedience may we honor and glorify the God who made us and who has provided a way for our salvation.