

ARE THERE TOO MANY CHURCHES?

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on September 24, 1961 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

“Are There Too Many Churches?” When first heard our subject sounds rather strange. Obviously, there are not too many, but rather too few churches when you consider the church a bulwark against every form of evil. The church stands against infidelity, vice, crime, greed, lust, hate, war, and many other evils. Obviously, there are not too many, but rather too few churches when you consider the church a lighthouse sending forth rays of faith, hope, love, truth, morality, and other Christian virtues.

But considered from another standpoint, there are too many churches. There are too many divergent religious doctrines and practices. In fact, there are so many different creeds in existence today that a recent religious census of the United States listed more than 250 separate, distinct denominations existing side by side here in America. It is this multiplicity of churches, based on different doctrines and creeds, that leads us to say that there are too many churches,

Christ’s Plea For Unity

In considering this theme, as in every other, we need to go back to the inspired scriptures in order to hear the teachings of the Lord. Listen first to Christ’s prayer, prayed on the night of his betrayal, just a few hours before his death on the cross. We find it in the 17th chapter of John and I read verses 20-23, “Neither for these (the apostles) only do I pray, but for them also that believe on me through their word; that they may all 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. And the glory which thou hast given me I have given unto them. that they may be one, even as we are one; I in them, and thou in me, that they may be perfected into one; that the world may know that thou didst send me, and lovest them, even as thou lovest me.” In the familiar conversation between Christ and his apostles, recorded in Matthew 16, there comes the moment when Jesus says, “And I also say unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock (the bedrock fact which Peter had just confessed: that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of God) I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” (Matt. 16: 18). Notice that Jesus speaks of his church in the singular.

The same singleness of the church is taught in Eph. 1:22-23, where the Holy Spirit guided Paul to write, “And he put all things in subjection under his feet, and gave him to be head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him that filleth all in all.” Three chapters later, in the same book we read, There is one body, and one Spirit, even as also ye were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all, and through all and in all.” (Eph. 4:4-6). Notice that just as there is one God, one Lord, and one Holy Spirit, there is one body--one church.

The Lord’s teachings against division in the church are never stronger than in I Cor. 1:10-13, “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. For it has been signified unto me concerning you, my brethren, by them that are of the household of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I mean, that each one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were you baptized unto the name of Paul?” It is obvious that even in the first century Satan had begun to wield his deadly tool of division. This passage indicates that the church at Corinth was already beginning to divide over personalities. This tendency did not stop, even with such warnings as that just read. But rather it has continued down to the present day. The names have changed--Luther, Calvin, Knox, Wesley, and others--but the practice remains the same.

In the Galatian letter Paul warned, “But though we, or an angel from heaven should preach unto you any gospel other than that which we preached unto you, let him be anathama. 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 anathama.” (Gal. 1:8-9). The invention of new doctrines, the change of old doctrines, and the development of creeds are foreign to the will of God. These have brought about these divisions, which God opposes.

The Modern Ecumenical Movement

Motivated by a realization that the present divided state of Christendom is both wrong and hurtful to the Cause of Christ, religious leaders of our day have been active in recent years in trying to bring about union of the various denominations. This is known as the Ecumenical Movement. In the past decade, for example, several large, historic churches have united or consolidated. As a result of this union, they now have a common name, a common membership, a common organization, and a wide latitude of freedom in doctrinal matters. For example, if a man wishes to become a member by being baptized, he is welcome; however, if another man wishes to become a member without baptism, he is equally welcome. Still other church groups are currently considering such union, and it is very likely that within the next few years several of the largest and oldest denominations will unite in the “United Churches of Christ of America.”

While we certainly commend the motivation behind these efforts at union, there is one serious fault; these are unions without unity. There is still no single faith, no single body of doctrine, no single set of convictions. There is simply an agreement to disagree on matters of faith. In some instances it is a matter of, "Believe anything you like, but let us be members together."

This is quite similar to the older view which for several generations has been quite generally accepted among the denominations. Men of different churches have not wished to be offensive to those with whom they work and among whom they live, so they have come to the compromise position of saying, "I think all the churches are all right. We are just going to heaven by different roads." This has been almost universally felt among members of the major denominations for many years. Honesty of purpose, sincerity of conviction, and depth of feeling have been considered sufficient. These have been substituted for unity of faith as taught in the New Testament.

In spite of vast differences, in both the new Ecumenical Movement and among the denominations generally, there has been a willingness to consider doctrinal differences unimportant. Baptism can be effusion, sprinkling, or immersion, according to the individual's own choice. Worship can be held on Saturday, the Jewish sabbath, or on Sunday, according to one's preference. Infant baptism or adult baptism is offered according to the recipient's wishes. The Lord's supper may be eaten weekly, quarterly, semi-annually, or annually. Wide latitude of doctrine concerning marriage and divorce, drinking, participation in carnal warfare, and many other matters has been treated as though it were of no importance. Even such basic convictions as the divinity of Christ, the inspiration of the Bible, and the existence of a personal God, have been dealt with on a "Choose your own position" kind of basis.

In other words, all of these things have been considered of no special importance, so let each man decide which way he wishes to go. How different this is from the scriptures, "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).

"The Truth Shall Make You Free"

We live in an age when the search for truth has been the watchword of the day. Ours is the scientific age. We have seen thousands of men and women spend millions of hours in laboratories doing research to find the facts. The scientific method has been respected everywhere. As a result there has been much progress in the fields of communication, transportation, and living standards generally. If we were choosing a motto for our age we might well choose, "Buy the truth and sell it not." (Prov. 23:23). Facts count. Ours is a generation in which men are not willing to stop at approximations, but want to know the exact truth about everything.

Yet strangely, when modern man leaves his six-day-a-week activities and moves into the field of religion, he hauls down the flag of truth and raises in its place the flag of honesty of purpose, sincerity of conviction, and depth of feeling. Quite inconsistently with the general scientific emphasis of our day when modern man moves into the realm of religion, "anything goes."

This "winking at truth" in the realm of religion is costing Christianity the respect of thinking men throughout the world. It does not make sense to a hard-headed engineer, or a keen-minded doctor, that a thing can be white or black, brown or gray, pink or orange, depending upon the desire of the person seeing it.

Let me be more specific. Just a few blocks from this building in which I preach there is a man who, under the guise of a Christian minister, holds the views that God is not the personal God of the Bible, that Christ was merely a man, and that the Bible is not inspired in the sense that it came from God. On the other hand I preach that the God of the Bible is real, that Christ is the divine Son of God, and that the Bible is inspired. The hard fact is that no matter how generous our feelings toward each other, this preacher and I cannot both be right. Either he is right, or I am right. Christ cannot be divine in one place and merely a man in another. Truth does not lie on opposite sides of the same fence.

In a slightly different direction there is a group of people, admirable in so many ways, which believes and teaches that baptism is not essential to salvation. As you know, I teach, because of numerous passages in the scriptures, that our Lord requires us to meet not only the condition of faith, but also the conditions of repentance, confession and baptism, before he forgives our sins and saves our souls. Now again, either I am right or those who preach this different view are right. We cannot both be right, holding opposite views on the necessity of baptism.

Still only a few minutes walk in a different direction there is another group of people, again a group admirable in many ways, who believe that Saturday, the Jewish sabbath, is the day when Christians ought to worship. We, of course, believe in worshipping on the Lord's resurrection day, the day the early Christians met to eat the Lord's supper, Sunday. Now either these people are right, or we are right. We cannot both be right, holding opposite views on this point, Truth again does not lie on opposite sides of the same fence.

Just as we have long known that two plus two equals four, and can never equal thirteen or ninety-nine, and just as we now know that the earth is round and not flat, we must come to know that certain teachings of God are true and that teachings different from these are not true. A teacher who might, because of family background or personal preference, wish to teach that the earth was flat, would not remain in the employment of any school system in America. Facts count. The same kind of thinking must be applied in the realm of religion. The teachings of God's word are true, and all variations, divergent doctrines, or deletions from the scripture teachings are

false. "Let God be found true, but every man a liar." (Romans 3:4). It was Christ who said, "Ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free." (John 8:32).

The Christian religion is based upon truth, upon fact, and modern Protestantism in "winking at the facts" is losing the battle for men's minds. Already, waves of unbelief are sweeping across the earth. In England, for example, only 7% of the population attend worship services as much as once a year. In America only approximately 20% of the American people can be found worshipping God on any Sunday that one might wish to survey. Thinking men are saying, "If Christianity can be believed any way that one wants to believe it, it must be a fairy story."

One can almost hear the derisive laughter of Khrushchev, when he thinks of Christianity. "Believe what you like, and that makes it true." "It sounds to him like "Alice in Wonderland." Modern Protestantism, with its willingness to accept anything that anyone wishes to believe, is like an ostrich burying its head in the sand. Our only hope is a return to the solid faith and convictions which the early Christians had.

Conclusion

We must go back to the Bible, letting it define for us God's truth on each point of faith and practice. Let us speak where the Bible speaks and be silent where it is silent. Let us have a "Thus saith the Lord" for everything that we do in faith and in practice. Let us restore in the 20th century the original church as found in the New Testament. Let us use God's word as the blueprint and build again Christ's church. If each of us will tune his own thinking to the things that are written in God's word, we will find that we are in agreement with each other, and in agreement with God. Then, standing on one solid foundation of truth--God's truth--we can conquer the world in the name of Christ.