

HUMAN CONFLICT -- PROBLEM OF THE AGES

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on November 1, 1964 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

In a few hours more than sixty million Americans will go to the polls to vote. They will cast their ballots for national, state and local candidates. For more than a year the newspapers, newsmagazines, radio and television have been talking endlessly about the election. Literally, hundreds of millions of words have been spoken or written. The candidates and their friends have made many speeches, and no one is unaware that November 3 is election day.

In the midst of this pre-election hustle and bustle, this cacophony of sound and fury, we pause for a moment to be thankful. First of all, we are thankful that we live under a government which allows freedom of speech and freedom of choice. While there has been more speaking than was necessary and some of it has been irresponsible and light-headed, we are deeply grateful that we live in a land where it is possible for everyone to express his own thinking. This is not true in many other countries of the world, especially those behind the Iron Curtain. The Frenchman Voltaire is credited with being the first to say, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." Will Durant, in his *The Story of Philosophy*, expressed the same idea in slightly different words, when he said, "I do not agree with a word you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." This is a very fine sentiment, for it implies a respect for human beings, regardless of their thinking.

In the second place we pause to be thankful for the universality of the ballot. In our land today no adult is excluded from the privilege of voting because of age, or lack of education, or lack of wealth, or because he is of a different race or background. Again, we are thankful for the secret ballot, which means that when one closes the curtains behind him in the voting booth, no one knows how he casts his ballot. This is vital to the having of free elections. Finally, we are thankful for the traditions that when the votes are counted, the decision is final. In other lands, revolutions often follow elections. In America, however, it is traditional for the losing candidate to pledge his support to the winning candidate, and then all of the citizens fall into solid ranks behind the victor. This is the way of law and order, this is the way we have built our great nation and this is the way that we will keep it great.

In the current campaign there has been a sharpness of feeling that is not good for the nation. Charges and counter-charges have been hurled from one candidate to another. These have often been stronger and more personal than in most other campaigns. Conflicts of feeling have been strong. In the heat of the campaign things have been said that have alienated friends and families. There has been evidence of hatred in a good many places. Let us, when the election is finished on Tuesday, resolve to do all that we can to erase these tensions and to develop the oneness of feeling so necessary to the achieving of success. May our influence be on the side of unity and good feeling, rather than on the side of ill-will and factionalism.

Differences among men are not new in our day. Conflict, opposition, strife, struggle, and difference of view constitute one of the great problems of the ages. While the current election campaigns have called our attention to feelings of sharp opposition, political rivalry is only one of the areas in which human beings have found themselves in conflict with each other. Let us now turn our attention to the broader and more permanent rivalry that exists among men.

Evidences of the Age-Old Problem

As one begins to read the oldest records of human conduct, the Bible, he finds in the fourth chapter of the book of Genesis an account of the rivalry between the sons of Adam and Eve. Cain was so moved with hatred that he killed Abel, thus committing the first crime and the first murder in human history. Two chapters later we read of the people of Noah's day. The righteous, essentially the family of Noah, were outnumbered by the multitudes who turned their backs upon God. The contrast between the thinking of the sons of God and the daughters of men was sharp indeed. In the thirteenth chapter of Genesis we read of the strife that existed between the herdsmen of Abraham and the herdsmen of Lot. Throughout the Old Testament we read of the struggle between God's people and the nations round about them. There were many wars and much suffering as God's people strove to be different from the sinful nations among whom they lived.

When we come to the New Testament we find that Satan had done his work so well that there was even contention among the apostles. The twentieth chapter of Matthew tells of the mother of James and John seeking places of preferment for her sons when Christ should set up his kingdom. I might add that most of the strife among men comes from a desire to advance oneself above one's fellowmen, or to secure a greater share of the material things of this world. If men could be taught not to seek their own preferment and not to love the things of this world so much, most of the strife and struggle among men would cease.

In the story of the apostles we read, "And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation concerning the two brethren. But Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Not so shall it be among you: but whosoever would become great among you shall be your minister; and whosoever would

be first among you shall be your servant: even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.” (Matt. 20:24-28).

The same divisive spirit was found among the Christians at Corinth. These who had been so lately pagans seem to have brought into the church some of their pre-Christian behavior. In I Cor. 1:10 Paul wrote, “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.”

In writing to the Galatians the apostle Paul listed a number of things which he called “works of the flesh.” It is amazing to notice that of the fifteen items he names, eight have to do with strife among human beings. He wrote, “Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these: fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousies, wraths, factions, divisions, parties, envyings, drunkenness, revellings, and such like; of which I forewarn you, even as I did forewarn you, that they who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.” (Gal. 5:19-21).

Secular history testifies to the universality of this problem. It has been present in every century both within and among all nations. Differences have existed between the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated. No century, no continent, no race has been exempt from this problem.

#### Some Differences Not Important

There are some areas in which differences of feeling are not of any significance. This is true in areas such as the choosing of a brand of automobile, or a brand of gasoline, or a particular kind of food, or the location for one’s home. Different likes and tastes are quite legitimate in such areas and there need be no problem connected with this variety of view. Similarly, different loyalties among athletic teams are of no real importance. In fact, a spirit of friendly, constructive rivalry can be a good thing. It can stimulate all to do their best and can actually add meaning and zest to life. It becomes wrong when it gets out of hand and causes anger or hatred or causes someone to be harmed.

One of the motivations used in our educational system is that of the contest, leading students to stimulate each other to do more than would otherwise be done in the realm of study and work. Our athletic program, particularly that within the schools, is designed through competition to get young people to take more exercise and therefore build stronger bodies than they would have were it not for the game aspect of their endeavors. Competition in business has meant these rivalries can get out of hand and cause damage or suffering. Even in areas where rivalry is legitimate and wholesome, let us remember that the rivalry must be friendly and constructive rather than filled with anger and hate.

#### Areas Where Differences Do Matter

There are other areas where differences are vitally important. These are areas involving principles of right and wrong. Some men believe in the existence of God, the divinity of Christ, the inspiration of the Bible, and other such matters of faith. Other men deny all of these. The differences between these two groups are vital indeed. Similarly, there are those who believe in honesty, truthfulness, integrity and morality. There appear to be others who do not believe that these are important elements. The conflict between such divergent views on such important matters is of most significance. In these areas Christians must stand up and be counted. We must defend the principles in which we believe. We must work for the acceptance of these views among others. We must fight for their survival. However, we must use our influence in these areas in the right way and according to the right principles. Even in the support of right causes, men must be sure that their methods are also right.

Let us notice some of the principles by which Christians should live, in their fight against evil and error. First of all, we need to examine ourselves to make sure that we are in the right at any given time and on any given subject. Are we sure we are right or has prejudice, or self-interest, or ignorance, or misunderstanding blinded our eyes?

After World War II was over I heard Logan Fox, who had been reared in Japan, tell a rather meaningful story. When he went back to Japan after the war the Japanese people were very critical of the atomic bomb destruction of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. In America little had been said about the moral responsibility for the destruction of these two cities, for the emphasis was upon the infamy of Pearl Harbor. With rather keen insight, Brother Fox suggested to the Japanese, “You need to think more of Pearl Harbor than of Nagasaki and Hiroshima.” Back in America, he suggested to his fellow citizens, “We need to think more of Nagasaki and Hiroshima than we do of Pearl Harbor.” This story suggests that man needs to examine his own position and his own responsibilities first, before he is ready to charge others with wrong positions or misconduct.

In the second place, we must respect those with whom we differ. Even though at times our opponents may be in obvious error, they are still human beings made in the image of God. They still deserve our respect, even as we marshal our arguments against their wrong positions.

In the third place we must oppose evil, whenever and wherever it is found, but we must love those who are involved. Let us remember that our Lord loved sinful man enough to die for his salvation. Christ was concerned about the eternal destiny of the reprobate, the blasphemer, and the hypocrite. He not only taught but lived the principle of loving the sinner, while denouncing his sin. We must remember that man is made in the image of God and that if we can help him become disentangled from his sins he may yet spend eternity in heaven.

In the fourth place we must use God's machinery for settling our differences whenever there is the possibility of doing so. In Matt. 18:15-17 Jesus taught, "And if thy brother sin against thee, go, show him his fault between thee and him alone: if he hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother." Instead of telling others about how we have been mistreated, we must have the courage to go and talk with the one whom we feel has wronged us. In many instances the matter can be settled for all time in this simple way. "But if he hear thee not, take with thee one or two more, that at the mouth of two witnesses or three every word may be established." If we fail on the first try, the effort of mutual friends may result in bringing of two factions together in peace. "And if he refuse to hear them, tell it unto the church: and if he refuse to hear the church also, let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican." If all three steps fail, then we simply go different ways and avoid association with those who are of wrong thought and spirit.

Finally, we must remember that vengeance belongs only to the Lord. Even though there may be those who are in the wrong, it is not our responsibility to punish them for their evil works. Paul wrote, "Avenge not yourselves, beloved, but give place unto the wrath of God: for it is written, Vengeance belongeth unto me; I will recompense, saith the Lord. But if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him to drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire upon his head. Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good." (Rom. 12:19-21).

### Conclusion

Throughout life we will find ourselves in disagreement with other people. The Lord's principles suggest the honorable, right way to behave toward those with whom we differ. In all relationships of life, the best way is the Christian way. Our Lord has furnished us the principles of living under any and all circumstances. Even in the area of human differences, one of the most painful of all areas, he has given us the principles by which to live. There is no problem that can arise that does not have some fundamental approach suggested in God's word. When differences and conflicts arise, whether in the home, or in one's work, or in the church, there is a right way for the Christian to approach the solution to the problem.

For the salvation of our own souls and for the living of happy and useful lives, each of us needs to be a Christian. Not only does the Christian life lead toward heaven, it is a smoother, more effective, happier life than that of the man who tries to live without the leadership of his Lord. If you are not a child of God, believe in him with all your heart, turn from the sinfulness of the world, confess the name of Jesus before men, and be buried with him in baptism. Then rise to live a different kind of life. As you look back eventually, from the vantage point of eternity, you will be glad that you gave yourself to the Lord and to his way.