

CENTERING OUR LIVES ON CHRIST

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on November 21, 1954 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC.

“Now there were certain Greeks Among those that went up to worship at the feast: these therefore came to Philip, who was of Bethsaida of Galilee, and asked him saying, Sir, we would see Jesus.” (John 12:20-21). This passage introduces an interesting incident in which some men came to Jerusalem at Passover time and asked to be led to Jesus. They sought out Philip, who had come from Bethsaida of Galilee, and who possessed a Greek name. They came to him with the request, “Sir, we would see Jesus.”

These men were Greeks which means that they came from a very rich past. The Greek civilization was rich in history, in the arts, sculpturing particularly, and in philosophy. The thinkers of the world were Greeks. There were Plato, Aristotle, Socrates, and a long list of others. The fact that these men came saying, “We would see Jesus,” indicated in a rather wonderful way, that the philosophy of the world is inadequate. They came with hungering hearts, looking for something beyond the highest knowledge that the world knew. From time to time as we hear the learned of our day, such as those who appear on the Chicago Round Table and on other such forums, talk brilliantly concerning the accumulated knowledge of the centuries, I feel just as these early Greeks did--“We would see Jesus.”

Christ Is The Center

Jesus is the center of our whole universe. He is the center of our world. We date all the events of world history in terms of the day that he was born. More important to us, he is the center of our lives. He is the center of everything that matters. We obviously know that he is the center, for as Christians we wear his name and wear it proudly. When we assemble here in this building several times each week, we are entering a building on the front of which is emblazoned the name of Christ to indicate that the church belongs to Christ. Obviously we believe in Christ as the treasure of our world and the center of our lives.

Preoccupation Crowds Christ Out

Even though we consider Christ as central in our lives I wonder if perhaps sometimes, even in religious activities in which we engage, we do not crowd Christ into the background of our thinking. We think so often in terms of classes: who will teach them, how we may get more to attend them, and where they will meet. We think so often in terms of meetings: who will lead the singing, who will preach and all of the other details. We think so often in terms of bulletins to be printed or sermons to be mimeographed. We think in terms of buildings to be built: money to be raised, plans to be drawn, construction to be begun, and all the details that go with it. We also often think in terms of numbers--more people.

In the midst of all the details we forget the why. We need to ask, “Classes--why? Services--why? Bulletins--why? Buildings--why? Numbers--why?” Because of our love for Christ. Christ is the center of our lives and we must not let anything crowd him into the background. I do not wish to be “church-centered” in my preaching: I wish to be “Christ-centered.” The church is vital. It is a must if we are to reach heaven, but it takes its importance from the fact that it is Christ’s way of saving the souls of men. It is not the church that is central, it is Christ that is central.

The Bible

I often preach, as you know, concerning the importance of reading the Bible. I have urged that we read it in its entirety and a number of us have done so. I wish to exalt the Bible in my preaching always, but only in order that Christ may be supreme. The Bible is only paper and ink, leather and silk, unless it tells us of Christ and his message,

The following selection concerning the Bible was given me when I was only a child by Brother Horace W. Busby. It is entitled “Eulogy of the Bible,” and the author is unknown. As I read it to you notice the emphasis upon the King of Kings, the Savior:

Many years ago I entered the wonderful temple of God’s revelation.

I entered the portico of Genesis and walked down through the Old Testament Art Gallery where the pictures of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, David, and Daniel hung on the wall.

I entered the music room of the Psalms where the Spirit swept the keyboard of nature, and brought forth the dirge-like wail of the weeping prophet Jeremiah; to the grand impassioned strains of Isaiah until it seemed that every reed and harp in God’s organ of nature responded to the tuneful touch of David, the sweet singer of Israel.

I entered the chapel of Ecclesiastes where the voice of the preacher was heard, and passed into the Conservatory of Sharon where the Lily of the Valley’s sweet scented spices filled and perfumed my life.

I entered the business room of the Proverbs and passed into the observatory room of the Prophets where I saw many telescopes of various sizes, some pointing to far off events, but all concentrated on the Bright Morning Star which was soon to rise over the moon-lit hills of Judea for our salvation.

I entered the audience room of the King of Kings and caught a vision from the standpoint of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John; entered the Acts of the Apostles where the Holy Spirit was doing its office work in the forming of the church; passed into the Correspondence room where sat Paul, Peter, James, Jude and John, penning their epistles.

I stepped into the Throne of Revelation, where all towered into glittering peaks.

I got a vision of the King seated upon his throne in all his glory, and I cried:

All hail the power of Jesus' name  
Let angels prostrate fall.  
Bring forth the royal diadem,  
And crown him Lord of all."

We read in the Bible, Old Testament and New, we come in its central theme to the person and to the teachings of Jesus Christ. The Old Testament is simply leading up to that crowning event and the New Testament is unfolding it in its fullness. Jesus referred to the scriptures in these words, "These are they which bear witness of me." (John 5:39). While the Bible is prominent in my preaching, I hope it is a means to emphasize the Master, who saves our souls/

#### What About Doctrines?

Sometimes I preach doctrines. I name and explain the steps that a man must take in order to become a Christian: faith, repentance, confession and baptism. But I hope these doctrines are never separated from the Christ who gave them. They are only the means of drawing near to our Savior.

I sometimes preach to you the doctrines concerning the church: its organization and its worship. Always, I trust, I point out that they take their importance from Christ. Christ is the center.

#### A Comparison

Think of this whole matter in terms of a young couple getting married. We see a fine young man and a fine young woman. They fall in love, pick a date for the marriage, and establish a home. After a while children come. The most important element in that home is the love that binds them together. By necessity the father must earn a living. He goes to town each morning, works eight hours or more, and brings home the money that pays the bills. As the years go by he spends long hours at the grindstone, earning the family income. The wife also has her responsibilities. She must cook for the family, wash the dishes, keep the house and clothes clean, and all the rest.

As the years come and go there is the likelihood that they will forget the central thing which binds them together--the love which is really the basis of the home. They lose it through preoccupation with working at the office and washing the dishes. They need to stop occasionally and lift their eyes from these necessary, but secondary, things to the main thing--the love that they bear for each other. Just so you and I need to lift our eyes even from these good things which we do, in order to remember the one for whom we do them.

#### Paul's Letter to the Philippians

This theme--putting Christ first--is apparent in the four-chapter letter which the apostle Paul wrote to the Philippians. Almost every other verse in this entire book mentions Christ and the entire wonderful, personal relationship that Paul had with him. You see it even as the letter begins. "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus that are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." (Phil. 1:1-2). In only two verses, he refers to Christ three times. Later in the same chapter he says, "For me to live is Christ." (Phil. 1:21). To the Galatians he said something similar: "It is not I that live, but Christ who liveth in me." (Gal. 2:20).

Later he comes to the climax of his exaltation of Christ when he says, "Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, existing in the form of God, counted not the being on an equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men; and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea the death of the cross. Wherefore God also highly exalted him, and gave unto him the name which is above every name; that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven and things on earth, and things under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father." (Phil. 2:5-11). Christ is central and this passage says it in such wonderful language.

## What About God?

Someone might say, “Doesn’t the emphasis you are placing on Christ leave God out?” I would answer this question in two ways: First, I would answer by saying that God and Christ, while two separate persons, are of the same substance. They have co-existed eternally, as John says in his gospel record. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God ... and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:1,14). Jesus is God in the flesh. We see him and by seeing him we know God the Father, for he said, “He that hath seen me hath seen the Father.” (John 14:9). It is almost entirely in terms of Jesus that we have our truest conception of God, so when you and I honor Jesus we are honoring God the Father as well.

I would answer in the second place by asking, “Is there a man in this audience who has a son who has received some great honor? Is there a man here who has a boy who has been singled out for national recognition of some sort?” Someone holds up his hand, and I say, “Sir, did the honor given your boy lessen the honor afforded you?” And he would say, “Oh, no, the honor that came to my boy has increased my honor, for after all I am his father you know.” The honors that we bestow on Christ increase the glory and the honor that we give God in heaven. Jesus was God in the flesh. Don’t forget that.

## Paul’s Further Emphasis

In chapter three of Philippians after Paul had looked back for a moment to his life under the law of Moses, he said, “I myself might have confidence even in the flesh, if any man thinketh to have confidence in the flesh, I yet more, circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as touching the law a Pharisee; as touching zeal, persecuting the church, as touching the righteousness that is in the law, found blameless. Howbeit that things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ. Yea, verily, and I count all things to be loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord.” (Phil. 3:4-8).

Later he said, “Rejoice in the Lord always.” (Phil. 4:4). Notice finally that great power-giving sentence, “I can do all things in him who strengtheneth me.” (Phil. 4:13). In his letter to Timothy he wrote, “I know him whom I have believed and am persuaded that he is able to guard that which I have committed to him, against that day.” (II Tim. 1:12). It was to the Corinthians that he wrote, “I have resolved not to know anything among you save Jesus Christ and him crucified.” (I Cor. 2:2). That is the testimony of the great apostle to the Gentiles.

## “I Will Draw All Men”

Will we never learn that the thing which makes Christianity real is not what we think, or say, or do, but Christ. We do not need to explain him, nor defend him. We only need to present him to the world. It is his exalted truth, his perfect life, and his matchless love which reaches out and takes hold of men. Jesus once said, “And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.” Oh, he has such power, if only we can show the real Christ to the world about us.

That is the story of Lew Wallace, the man who wrote “Ben Hur.” Lew Wallace didn’t start out to write the magnificent novel “Ben Hur.” He began his research project to destroy the “Jesus myth.” He was not a believer and his study was designed to show to all men the fallacy of faith in Jesus. But as he read, there came a faith that he had never known before. The stubborn facts of the existence of Jesus--the kind of man he was, the kind of teaching that he did--eventually led him to write, not the book that he had thought to write, but the great novel, “Ben Hur,” about the impact of Jesus on a man of the ancient Roman days. It was a story written as a tribute by a devout worshipper.

It is the same as the story of the woman by the well in Samaria. She came up to draw water and, after meeting Jesus, went home to say to her fellow townsmen, “Come out and see a man who told me all things whatsoever I did.” (John 4:29). They came out to see Jesus.

It is the story of Mary Magdalene, the woman of ill repute, who became a pure and fine disciple of the Lord. It is the story of the little tax collector down in Jericho who met Jesus from the vantage point of the Sycamore tree and took him home with him for dinner. He found himself saying, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to feed the poor and if I have wrongfully exacted ought of any man I restore fourfold.” Then Jesus said, “This day shall salvation come to thy house.” (Luke 19:8-9). Our observation quickly proves the truth of Christ’s statement, “If I be lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men unto me.”

## All Hail The Power Of Jesus’ Name

Jesus is the center of our world, but he is more. He is the center not only of our world but of the universe and everything that is in it. He is the center of everything that is important, so the lines of the song seem especially fitting,

All hail the power of Jesus’ name  
Let angels prostrate fall.  
Bring forth the royal diadem

And crown him Lord of all.

We began our study with the passage which said that certain Greeks came to one of the disciples of Jesus and said, "Sir, we would see Jesus." The non-Christian world is coming even now with hungry hearts, to say to us who are his disciples, "We would see Jesus." May the reflections that we show them in our lives be the kind that will inspire them to want to be like us as we are like Christ. The same apostle Paul said, "Be ye imitators of me, even as I am an imitator of Christ." (I Cor. 11:1).

As we close these thoughts may Christ be exalted and through him, the Father above. May the church take a vital place in our lives because that is the way in which we are related to him. May the Bible be to us God's sacred book. May the doctrines be held dear, because they stem from Christ. Christ is the center.