

JESUS, THE MASTER TEACHER

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on November 23, 1969 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

According to the scriptures, Christ's last words before his return to heaven were, "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). When the church was established on Pentecost, the disciples immediately began to fulfill this commandment of the Lord. Later, when the church was scattered from Jerusalem under heavy persecution, they continued to fulfill the command. "They therefore that were scattered abroad went about preaching the word." (Acts 8:4). Several years later, there was this further evidence that they had not taken lightly the Lord's great commission to preach the gospel wherever they went. "All they that dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks." (Acts 19:10).

One of the major responsibilities of all Christians is to share the gospel with others. Most of us, even in this 20th century, far removed from the time when Christ lived on the earth, still feel this heavy responsibility. Perhaps no one of us is without a deep desire to help someone else find Christ and salvation. In many cases, our efforts have been successful, yet in other instances our preaching of Christ has fallen upon deaf ears. How often have we wanted to share our faith and the joy that we find in Christ with some neighbor, or someone with whom we work, or some friend, only to discover that they do not appear to be interested! It is here that we find that Christ's life and work not only contain the message of Christianity, but also that he suggests the best method to follow in preaching his word.

The Problem Approach

Some years ago I visited with an elder of a church in a distant city who was also an outstanding insurance salesman. In the course of our conversation he indicated that in selling insurance he had found it generally quite effective to present to a prospective customer a problem which he needed to face. For example, he would visit with a prospective buyer in his home on an evening after work. After a brief time of getting acquainted, he would ask his host, "What would your family have done if you had not come home tonight?" If there had been a heart attack, or a fatal automobile accident, what would his family have done? Generally speaking, this led the young husband and father to do some serious thinking and opened his mind to his need for life insurance. People generally have a resistance to life insurance salesmen and are not eager to grant appointments. However, the attitude changes radically when the person begins to think of his own family and of his need to protect his loved ones. One company even advertises, "There is no obligation, except to the ones you love."

John Dewey, a leader in education in the past generation, has outlined the five steps in thinking as follows: Attention, Problem, Solution, Visualization, and Action. Thinking ordinarily begins when one's attention is called to a problem. A solution is sought, evaluated as to its effectiveness, and then action is taken.

Robert Hutchins, long-time chancellor of the University of Chicago, in his earlier years taught law at Yale. The story is told that at the beginning of a new year of school he met his large class of prospective young lawyers and asked, "Are there any questions?" There were none, so he said, "Class dismissed." At the next scheduled meeting of the class the same thing happened. After asking for questions, and getting none at the third scheduled meeting of the class, he did precisely the same thing. This time, however, one of the students asked if the class was not going to meet at all. Hutchins then responded, "Not until you have some questions to which you wish to learn answers." This story highlights the importance of having some kind of question or problem in mind before learning can take place. The same general principle is true in the preaching of the gospel. Unless we can cause the hearer to feel some need, to face some problem, or to have some question, his mind is likely not to be open to preaching.

Christ's Use of Problems

As one turns through the gospel according to Mark, he discovers that Christ often created a situation in which some question arose or some problem was identified. For example, in Mark 2:1-12, we read the story of a paralyzed man who was brought to Capernaum. and, since the house was crowded with people, was let down through the roof so that Jesus might heal him. The text says, "And Jesus seeing their faith said unto the sick of the palsy, Son thy sins are forgiven." Jesus might have healed him without comment, but he saw an opportunity to emphasize the primary element of his own identity, that he was the divine Son of God. Jesus, therefore, mentioned the forgiving of the man's sins.

This, in turn, brought a strong response, "But there were certain of the scribes sitting there, and reasoning in their hearts, Why doth this man thus speak? he blasphemeth: who can forgive sins but one, even God? And straightway Jesus, perceiving in his spirit that they so reasoned within themselves, saith unto them, Why reason ye these things in your hearts? Which is easier, to say to the sick of the palsy, Thy sins are forgiven; or to say, Arise, and take up thy bed, and walk? But that ye may know that the Son of man hath

authority on earth to forgive sins (he saith to the sick of the palsy), I say unto thee, Arise, take up thy bed, and go into thy house. And he arose, and straightway took up the bed, and went forth before them all; insomuch that they were all amazed, and glorified God, saying, We never saw it on this fashion.”

Notice especially that last sentence. As a result of this incident the people were amazed. They glorified God. And they said, “We never saw it on this fashion.” They realized that only a divine being could forgive sins and they were impressed that Jesus’ miracle implied strongly that he had that divine power. The unusual conversation and supporting miracle which Christ performed had a great effect upon the people.

Another example is found in Mark 6:1-3, “And he went out from thence; and he cometh unto his own country; and his disciples follow him. And when the sabbath was come, he began to teach in the synagogue: and many hearing him were astonished, saying, Whence hath this man these things? and what is the wisdom that is given unto this man, and what mean such mighty works wrought by his hands? Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James, and Joses and Judas, and Simon? and are not his sisters here with us?”

Christ’s primary purpose in working miracles was not to heal the sick nor to give sight to blind eyes or hearing to deaf ears. Although he certainly was pleased to help people, his primary purpose was something else. If we evaluate his life in terms of the sick and maimed that were healed, his life would have to be put down as practically a failure. There were almost as many sick people and blind people and deaf people when he was crucified as there were when he began his ministry. Even those he raised from the dead died again. Christ’s primary purpose in working miracles was to open the minds of the people by showing them that he had divine power. They were startled, even shocked, and then realized that he was no ordinary man. At this point their minds were opened for his teaching concerning the eternal, spiritual kingdom.

In Mark 7:1-5 we read that the Pharisees and scribes were disturbed because Christ’s disciples did not wash their hands ceremonially before eating. This was considered a major matter, and when Christ’s disciples disregarded it the people were shocked. This problem in the minds of the people enabled Jesus, in answering their question, “Why walk not thy disciples according to the tradition of the elders, but eat their bread with defiled hands?” to point out that these people were more concerned about the washing of hands than they were about the cleansing of their hearts. It was a springboard for the teaching of one of his major lessons.

In Mark 10:17 we have the example of a rich, young ruler who came to Christ with a problem already on his heart. He asked, “Good Teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?” Mark 12:14-15 finds the people bringing another question to Jesus, “Is it lawful to give tribute unto Caesar, or not? Shall we give, or shall we not give?” Later, in the same chapter, Mark 12:28, a young scribe asked, “What commandment is the first of all?” In these and many other instances people brought questions to Jesus, asking answers of him. This is an ideal situation. When one has a problem or question, he then seeks a solution or an answer. In this situation teaching is welcome.

Through the years I have noticed in the teaching of my classes a great difference between students. Those students who feel some need for the information being imparted are eager and highly motivated. As a result they are good students. On the other hand, those students who feel no need for the information and see no practical application of it to their lives are dull and uninterested. If one sees a need for what is being taught, he listens eagerly and learns quickly. In teaching others about Christ, we must somehow provide the motivation to lead them to see a need for Christ’s message.

Suggested Questions

Let us see if we can make some applications of the principle that we have been discussing. Let us think in terms of a conversation which you might have with some friend with whom you have worked, a friend who does not go to church and has no apparent interest in Christianity. Sometime, during a coffee break or a lunch hour discussion you might say, “Suppose Christianity is true after all? What then? Suppose that there is to be a judgment when you must give an account of your life, what would you say?” It is quite likely that the person will become concerned about such an eventuality. If you can help him, or her, to feel the problem of being unprepared when the judgment day comes, you have opened the mind for further teaching.

Or, the situation might be one in which someone is openly saying that he does not agree with what the Bible teaches on the subject of such-and-such a point. At that point you might ask, “Have you ever read the Bible through? Should a man condemn and reject something which he has only partially examined? Should he not read it in its entirety and be sure that he understands it before he condemns it?”

Yet another approach in a conversation with someone who has never shown an interest in Christ or a willingness to obey Christ’s commands might be this: “What weaknesses or faults do you see in Christ?” Here, one would continue to explore Christ’s life until it becomes apparent that there were no weaknesses or faults.

Another approach, this time in a home where there are small children, might well be: “What about your children? Do you not want them to know the principles of the Bible?” This would be designed to lead a young mother and father, who themselves do not go to

church or show a concern for religion, to realize that they are actually short-changing their children by failing to provide religious instructions for them.

Yet another possible approach might be to suggest to a person, "If you had to exchange places and be someone else, who would you want to be?" In this case it would be necessary to explain further that you have in mind a situation in which the person could no longer be himself but must be someone else. What other person would he most like to be? There is a good possibility that the person he selects will be a Christian. If so, one's next comment is more than obvious. If one desires to be like the Christian--a generous hearted, kind, considerate, loving individual--should he not now become such a person by becoming a follower of Christ?

Yet another approach, this time to a very successful businessman who is wealthy and has accomplished a number of outstanding feats during his business career, might be something like this: "Your life has been unusually successful. You are widely known, wealthy, and highly regarded by the business community. But what is there of permanent value in that which you have accomplished?" The person, hopefully, would be caused to see that all of his achievements have to do with the here-and-now and not with eternal values.

Conclusion

While no one of these particular situations may be just the approach for the person you have in mind, the basic idea is practical and can be used by all of us. Try to think of some way of pointing out to the person a problem that only Christ can solve. Try to raise some question to which Christ alone has the answer. If we can make the person feel the problem which Christ alone can solve we have opened his heart and mind to Christ's solution. If we have raised a question that only Christ can answer we have likewise opened his heart to hear Christ's message. It is our responsibility to teach, and teaching takes place when the hearer's mind is open, and there is a willingness to listen. This comes when the hearer feels some need for what we have to say, some value in what we desire to teach.