

DANGERS OF LIBERALISM

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter, B.A., M.A., A.B., PH.A., at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, on December 3, 1961 and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

There are two major battlefields on which Christians of the 20th century are called to fight. One is the battlefield of denominational error--an area in which the scriptures have either been ignored or misinterpreted. The other is a battlefield of liberal infidelity--an area where the basic concepts of the Christian religion are questioned. For the past few generations the gospel preacher's primary struggle has been with other professed believers in Christ, as he has pleaded for the pure New Testament faith and for the original church of the Lord. Though this need continues in our generation also, the growing need of the 20th century seems to be in the area of a battle for the Christian faith itself.

Liberal theological views, which question the very existence of a personal God, the deity of Jesus Christ, and the inspiration of the Bible, are taught by prominent religious leaders and are widely believed. Only a few weeks ago, a grandmother came to me after a service in a western city to solicit my prayers in behalf of her grandson who was then a student in large secular university. He had been reared to believe in the fundamental truths of the Christian religion but his faith in these truths was gradually slipping away. I not only promised to pray for him, but also suggested some faith-sustaining reading for him to do. Still more recently, a young man whom I have known for a number of years told me of a course in religion which he is taking in a well-known university and then said, "Brother Baxter, I don't know whether I believe in God anymore."

These two examples are sufficient to suggest the problem facing the church today. Over the past few years I have talked with a number of young people who want to continue to believe in the Christian faith, but who are being influenced by skepticism and doubt and are wavering in their faith. Some of these young people who have been taken far away from home and church influence by the armed services. Others have learned to doubt through business and professional associations. By far the largest number, however, have had their deep questions concerning the validity of the Christian religion raised while studying in the highly respected colleges and universities of the land.

No New Questions

The questions usually raised are not new questions but old ones. The existence of a personal God was doubted not only in the centuries before Christ, but also through all of the centuries since the time of Christ, by some of the philosophers of the world. Gnosticism had a rather vague conception of God. Deism and Pantheism defined God in totally un-Biblical ways. Similarly, the deity of Christ has been a matter of concern with some not only in recent times but back through the centuries. As early as the second century the Docetics questioned whether Jesus was really both human and divine. The first ecumenical council was held in Nicea in 325 A.A. to settle the question of the relationship of God and Christ. Was Jesus divine or not? Likewise, there have been many views concerning the inspiration of the Bible back through the ages. Again we say, "These questions are not new in the 20th century, but are simply the old questions and the old doubts revived."

In recent generations the philosophers, who have long questioned revealed religion, have been joined by many scientists in attacking the Christian religion. As man has become more and more independent, being able to care for more and more of his needs through his own inventions and the development of his own institutions, he has leaned less heavily upon God. Much of the modern world is now a secular world rather than a religious world. For example, 93 percent of the British people do not attend worship services as much as once a year. This means that England has largely become a secular society, which is another way of saying that the people generally have lost faith in the Christian religion.

There is a special need, therefore, in the 20th century for Christians "to know whereof they speak." Many young people have accepted the Christian religion without thorough examination of its claim to be the true religion. Lest our religion be open to the charge that it is "merely inherited," we need to know the factual evidence for its truthfulness. Many young people have been swept away from the faith, needlessly, simply because they had not been acquainted with the evidence which solidly supports their faith.

An even more disturbing fact has become apparent in recent years. The men who are raising the greatest doubts of all are the religious leaders, particularly those in the theological seminaries and schools of religion. A century ago Robert Ingersoll, noted American orator, traveled about America delivering a blasphemous speech entitled, "The Mistakes of Moses." Wherever he went he was soundly condemned and his message refuted by the clergy of the various denominations. If Mr. Ingersoll could be brought back from the grave, he would undoubtedly wear a smile of satisfaction. The very views advocated in his speech and so generally condemned by religious leaders a century ago are now being taught by the religious leaders of those same churches and in the training institutions for young preachers. Modern religious leaders are falling more and more into the realm of "modernism" or "liberalism." Their destructive testimonies need to be met with solid fact.

Liberal theologians of our day deny the inspiration of the Bible, though they often affirm that they believe in the inspiration of the Bible. Their definition of such is very different from the orthodox definition. By inspiration they mean simply that the writers of the Bible were very spiritually-sensitive men. Instead of the Bible being a book given by God, through the medium of inspired writers, it is rather a book written by men who had rather unusual insights into spiritual truths. The argument goes something like this: The Romans had a genius for government and organization; the Greeks had a genius for art and learning; the Hebrews had a genius in spiritual matters.

The origin of the scriptures is explained in a purely human way. The Old Testament came, according to the Documentary Hypothesis, from a number of different sources, known as the J, E, P, A, strands. Moses had almost nothing to do with the writing of the Old Testament; rather a redactor in the 7th century B.C. brought these fragments of the past together and made up the Old Testament. The New Testament is explained quite similarly by the hypothesis of Form Criticism. Rudolf Bultmann, in his book, *Kerygma and Myth*, explains that the Bible has many scientific myths along with some eternal truth. It devolves upon man to separate the myth from the truth.

Still other theologians of our day use the illustration of the Bible being like a baby in a cradle. The baby is precious, though the cradle is not. Similarly, the Bible has in it certain eternal truths, but it is surrounded by much that might be compared to the unimportant cradle which contains the baby. Still another way of saying it is that the Bible is like a precious gift wrapped in ordinary wrapping paper. The modern theologian sets out to remove the worthless wrappings and to keep only the precious gift. Still another widely known theologian of our day speaks of the Bible containing sand and grit, along with milk. In all of these illustrations, it is easy to see that the arbiter is man's own reason. Man himself will sit in judgment on the Bible and decide what is cradle, what is mere worthless wrapping, and what is sand and grit. This has led one teacher to say, "The apostle Paul thought so and so, but we know that he was mistaken in his view." Another, widely known for his scholarship made the statement, "Actually, we cannot know with certainty that Jesus ever did any one thing that is attributed to him, nor can we know with absolute certainty that he ever made any one statement that is attributed to him. Probably he did and said many of the things that are connected with his life in the gospel narratives, but we cannot be certain of even one."

Further, theologians of our day are prone to deny the miraculous elements of the Bible. The Genesis account of creation becomes merely a mythological or superstitious explanation. Organic evolution is the real answer to the origin of life on the earth, they tell us. The flood was only a local disturbance, according to this view. And similarly, they tell us that the miracles of Christ were simply exaggerated hero-worship stories.

Liberalism in our day denies the divinity of Christ. It is unpopular in theological circles to believe in the virgin birth of Jesus. He did not really work miracles, as claimed by those who were his contemporaries, and there are many, some of whom occupy prominent pulpits, who do not believe in the resurrection of Christ from the dead. Similarly, there is no judgment, no heaven nor hell. Christianity thus becomes simply one of the world's several great religions, alongside Buddhism, Shintoism, Confucianism, Hinduism, and Moslemism.

#### Christian Evidences

It is my privilege each year to teach a class on Christian Evidences at David Lipscomb College, a course for Juniors and Seniors on the college level. In this course we do extensive reading and point out many answers to the perplexing problems of faith that confront young people of our day. A partial bibliography for this course is as follows:

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In our study of Christian Evidences, we examine five major areas. The first of these is: (1) The existence of God. In this brief message it is impossible to do more than suggest a few of the thoughts presented at great length in our course of study. But even in a sentence or two it is possible to point out to those who have questioned the existence of a personal God that we live in a universe that functions with great precision and with obvious plan. When we look into the microscopic world and see the marvels of its operation, when we examine the visible world of plants, animals, and man, and when we look through the telescope at the marvelous precision of the universe about us, we are overwhelmed with the realization that behind all of this there must have been an infinite creative mind, a master designer, a great architect. Surely, "The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament showeth his handiwork." (Ps. 19:1).

The second area of our concern is that of: (2) The creation of the universe. Here our efforts are two-fold: first, to sift through all of the claims made by various speakers and writers in the name of science and determine what has actually been proved. There is much loose speaking on scientific matters and even by scientists. We need to realize that the scientist begins with a theory, after which he seeks for empirical evidence for the correctness of the theory. When some preliminary evidence is found the theory advances to the status of hypothesis. When really substantial evidence is found and proof is achieved then the hypothesis is known as fact. The widely held theory of evolution, for example, has advanced only to the position of hypothesis, for the evidence has not yet been found to prove that it is true. Similarly, with the theories and hypotheses concerning the age of the earth and concerning the time that man has been on the earth. Christians wisely adopt a "wait and see" attitude, knowing that science has revised its own theories often and continually through the past centuries. Until science has proved its case in regard to the origin of the universe, Christians may legitimately wait and see.

On the other hand, it is important to point out that teachers of religion have often in the past fastened upon the scriptures interpretations which were not sound. For example, the Bible nowhere gives us a date for the beginning of our world. Many have thought that the dates suggested by Bishop Ussher, an Anglican bishop in Ireland several centuries ago, are a part of the text of the Bible. Such is not the case. They are merely the guesses of this religious leader of long ago. Certain phases of these dates are quite practical and are generally dependable, but they do not at all suggest when the world began. Rather, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. And the earth was waste and void ..." (Gen. 1:1-2). The Bible simply says that in the beginning God created the earth, giving no hint as to when that beginning was. Just how long the earth remained waste and void no one knows. It might have been for billions of years, though no one knows.

A third area of our special study is: (3) The inspiration of the Bible. Here we examine the claims of the men who wrote portions of the Bible; the style in which the Bible was written; the remarkable unity achieved by more than forty different writers who wrote over a period of 1600 years largely without examining each other's writings, yet with remarkable unity; the fulfilled prophecies of the Bible; the scientific foreknowledge of the Bible; and the influence which the Bible has had upon mankind in general. Is it likely that a book of fiction, a book claiming to be from God though not actually from God at all, could have had so great an influence on mankind in the direction of honesty, integrity, truthfulness, morality and similar virtues?

A fourth area of our study is: (4) The authenticity of miracles. One of the fine books of our day on this subject is the book, *Miracles*, by C. S. Lewis, fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford University, England. This is must reading for anyone who has doubts concerning the supernatural elements in the Bible. Here we shall simply ask, "Is it unreasonable to believe that the God who created the world and everything in it should occasionally for a purpose step back in and touch his creation in some meaningful way?" That is all that a miracle is -- God continuing to be concerned with his creation and his creatures and from time to time modifying or changing something. Rather, it seems more unreasonable to believe that God would create our universe and then go away leaving it entirely on its own, never looking back to see nor to adjust nor to help.

Finally, our study deals with: (5) The deity of Christ. The evidence for the life, miracles, and teaching of Jesus is simply the direct testimony of competent people of his day who were eyewitnesses to the facts that they attest. These were people whose reputation for honesty, integrity, and competence has not been questioned. They told what their eyes saw, their ears heard, and their hands is felt. This is empirical evidence, the kind that modern science demands. This is the same kind of evidence, the only kind of evidence, that we have for most of history. How do we know that Alexander the Great led an army and conquered the world? How do we know that Darius the Persian lived? How do we know any fact of ancient history? By the same kind of evidence that we know of Jesus of Nazareth, his life and work.

#### Conclusion

In this all-too-brief study, the best that we can do is simply suggest the great problem that faces the church today and particularly our young people who are going on in higher education. Surely, the leaders of the church need to be more aware of the danger and more active in providing an acquaintance with the real evidence for the support of Christianity that our young people need. We have long been concerned to provide the answers that Christians need in order to remain true to the church of our Lord and to the great principles of the inspired word of God in a religious world that has been modified and changed by the doctrines of men. Similarly, we need to

expend the same kind of effort to ward off the attacks of those who doubt the foundational principles of the Christian religion, as do the liberals of our day.

It is almost universally true that when a person comes face-to-face with a question that he has never heard before, a question for which he has no answer, that he assumes that there is no answer. Not knowing an answer himself, he supposes that no one knows an answer. This is not the case, however, for in the area which we are studying there is a great deal of solid faith-building evidence, though it is often unknown to the young people who need to know it.

Finally, it seems only reasonable to suggest that those in high places who question the inspiration of the Bible and the facts which it contains, should first of all give a careful reading to the Bible itself. Is it not reasonable to say that before one condemns what the Bible teaches he should have read the Bible and given it a fair hearing? Yet, many of those who are most outspoken in denouncing the scriptures and destroying its authority have never read it in any complete and fair sense. Actually, the reading of the Bible is one of the most convincing evidences that it is a book from God. "Faith cometh of hearing, and hearing by the word of God." (Romans 10:17). Let us read the book, and let it speak for itself. Let us also know the extra-Biblical evidences for the support of these basic concepts of the Christian religion.

From the little book of Jude near the end of the New Testament we would quote briefly these words which might well be applied to those who destroy the faith of young Christians, "For there are certain men crept in privily, even they who were of old written of beforehand unto this condemnation, ungodly men, turning the grace of our God into lasciviousness, and denying our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ ... These are they who are hidden rocks in your love-feasts when they feast with you, shepherds that without fear feed themselves; clouds without water, carried along by winds; autumn trees without fruit, twice dead, plucked up by the roots; wild waves of the sea, foaming out their own shame; wandering stars, for whom the blackness of darkness hath been reserved forever." (Jude 4, 12-13). To which Paul's words might be added, "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, fashioning themselves into apostles of Christ. And no marvel; for even Satan fashioneth himself into an angel of light. It is no great thing therefore if his ministers also fashion themselves as ministers of righteousness, whose end shall be according to their works." (II Cor. 11:13-15).