

THE WRONG IMAGE

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on December 8, 1963 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

It is interesting to stand before a class of young people and ask them to give their immediate reactions to questions concerning significant aspects of the Christian religion. It is especially interesting to notice their answers to the question, "Who is a Christian?" The most immediate answer is, "One who has been baptized." To this the teacher then responds, "What else?" Someone adds, "One who eats the Lord's Supper every Sunday." Again the teacher inquires, "What else?" Others respond, "The Christian is one who doesn't gamble." "The Christian doesn't dance." "The Christian doesn't steal." "The Christian doesn't commit adultery." "The Christian doesn't swear." "The Christian doesn't kill." So, the discussion continues, mentioning many things which the Christian does not do. As one analyzes a typical conversation of this kind he is impressed with the fact that many, or even most, of the answers are quite negative and that they do not really come to the heart of what a Christian is.

Imagine a stranger from some other section of our country, or even from some foreign country, becoming aware of the many buildings that bear the inscription, "church of Christ," and asking one of our fellow-citizens, "What is the church of Christ?" I think he would get an answer something like this, "Oh, that is the church that is against instrumental music in worship. They don't celebrate Christmas, or Lent, or Easter. They are against social drinking, dancing, and the like. It is my impression from many conversations over the years that a great many of our religious neighbors have the impression that we are a negative people. This image of the church is unfortunate.

Revealing Scriptures

At this point I should like to mention a few typical passages of scripture which emphasize that Christianity has a positive side as well as a negative side. For example, Romans 12:9 says, "Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which good." Notice that the emphasis upon cleaving to good is at least equal to the abhorrence of evil. Later in that same chapter, Romans 12:21, we read further, "Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good." Here it is again. In this case the emphasis is upon overcoming evil with good. Still another passage that suggests this same balance is I Thess. 5:21-22, "Prove all things; hold fast that which is good; abstain from every form of evil."

Christianity is not primarily or essentially a negative religion. It has certain negative aspects in it, as it must in view of the fact that much of the world is evil, but its primary emphasis is upon a positive note. There are two aspects of Christianity, when one considers the totality of the teaching of the scriptures. There must be a turning away from evil, but there must also be a turning toward good. One is reminded of the epitaph which a biographer gave to Cate the Censor of ancient Rome: "He loved not right, half so much as he hated wrong." This is no compliment. The love of right ought to come first, for it is to furnish the motivation for the hating of wrong.

It is quite true that we do not use instruments of music in our worship, but the primary reason for this is not a negative one but a positive one. Love for the Lord leads us to want to worship him in the way that he has specified in his word. Because we honor and respect the New Testament pattern and the example of the early apostle-guided Christians, we sing our praises unto Jehovah. As we read the scriptures we find, "Speaking one to another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord." (Eph. 5:19). A similar passage says, "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly: in all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts unto God." (Col. 3:16). Our worship of God is to be an active worship in which each person plays a part. It is because of the positive concern to follow the examples of the apostles and the other early Christians that we sing and do not play. As a result of this primary emphasis, it then follows that we leave instruments of music out of our worship, as was done by the early Christians for at least six centuries after the church began.

Christmas, Lent, Easter

It is true that we do not have religious ceremonies or festivals in honor of Christmas, or Lent, or Easter, but this also is not a negative action. It grows out of our dedication to follow pure New Testament faith and practice in all matters. As we read our Bibles we find nothing at all about Christmas, or Lent, or Easter, but rather we find a profound simplicity which emphasizes the Lord and our relationship to him throughout the year. Because of our dedication to "Speak where the scriptures speak and to be silent where the scriptures are silent," we emphasize only those activities of which we can read in the scriptures.

Religious celebrations in honor of Christmas, or Lent, or Easter are an outgrowth of Roman Catholic tradition. They do not appear in the scriptures; they developed in the thinking of men through the centuries. None of these words occur in the original Greek manuscripts of the scriptures or in the early copies of those manuscripts. In the King James Bible, in Acts 12:4, there is the mistranslation of the word Passover by the scholars of 1611 as "Easter," but this word does not occur in the original manuscripts. It is here simply as a mistaken translation and was corrected by subsequent versions of the Bible. Again, the emphasis against these

festivals has nothing at all to do with the sending of greetings of good will, or the giving of gifts to those who are in need, or those whom we love, but is entirely against unauthorized religious ritual and ceremony, and even this is because of a positive dedication to those things that can be found in the inspired scriptures

It is true that we encourage our young people not to dance, that we feel that drinking, even social drinking, is too dangerous to try, and that we feel that sensuous music also has a negative influence in the lives of Christians. Our motive for feeling that these ought to be left out of the Christian's life is primarily our desire for the pure, righteous, constructive life that Christ wants each of us to achieve. It is certainly not that we do not wish our young people to enjoy life, but rather that we want them to enjoy life in the deeper more lasting sense that comes only with righteousness and purity. Again, what might at first appear to be a narrow negativism, in reality is a broad, deep desire for the good way of life that Christ taught and exemplified.

Clear in Order to Plant

When our Lord was on the earth, he opposed many things because they were evil, yet the primary, overwhelming emphasis of his life was a positive one. I like to make comparison with our own pioneers who first spilled across the eastern mountains and braved the frontiers in the early days of our nation. They felled many a tree, cut and burned underbrush and cleared much land. All of this is negative, a destroying or tearing down. However, their motivation was not negative but positive. They cleared the fields in order that they might plant crops and sustain life. They cut clearings in the forest that they might build log cabins and houses in which to live and to work. So it was with Christ. He condemned and destroyed the evil in order that he might build the positive good. In similar vein, we today turn from many elements of modern twentieth century life, not because we want to be negative, but because in the deepest sense we want to be positive and constructive and to build the highest type of Christian lives.

In this we face a dilemma. It is so easy to be misunderstood as being always in a negative mood, condemning everything. This is the wrong image. Sometimes, too, we have been so engrossed in pointing out the wrong that we may have neglected to declare the right. The emphasis of our hearts, however, and the primary desire of our lives, is that we shall exalt the Christ and his way of life. We embrace not a narrow negativism, but a broad positivism concerning everything that is wholesome and fine. In this connection, then, let us ask our question again, "Who is a Christian?"

Born Anew

The Christian is one who has been born again. On one occasion Jesus said to Nicodemus, a ruler of the Sanhedrin, "Verily, verily, I say unto thee, except one be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God. Nicodemus saith unto him, How can a man be born when he is old? can he enter a second time into his mother's womb, and be born? Jesus answered, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except one be born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born anew. The wind bloweth where it will, and thou hearest the voice thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is everyone that is born of the Spirit." (John 3:3-8).

This passage suggests that just as man is born originally into the physical world, later on he must be born into the spiritual world. This means that he takes on a new name, enters a new family, acquires a new heritage, accepts a new set of values, and aims his life according to new purposes. This illustration from the Lord is a wonderful way of saying that being a Christian means beginning life over again.

In the book of Romans there is a similar illustration. "We who died to sin, how shall we any longer live therein? Or are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life. For if we have become united with him in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection; knowing this, that our old man was crucified with him, that the body of sin might be done away, that so we should no longer be in bondage to sin; for he that hath died is justified from sin." (Rom. 6:2-7).

This illustration serves to emphasize the same basic idea. When man becomes a Christian the old, sinful man dies and a new man takes his place. Perhaps the most significant single expression in this passage is "in newness of life." When we come to Christ we end one life and begin another.

Two Kingdoms

The Christian is one who is a citizen of two kingdoms. Obviously, every man is a citizen of the earthly kingdom in which he lives. When one becomes a Christian he continues to live in this earthly kingdom, but with even greater loyalty and usefulness. The Christian is more honest, more truthful, more willing to sacrifice, more obedient to the laws of the land, and a better citizen in general. There is a second kingdom, however, in which a Christian holds citizenship. This is a spiritual kingdom, or as the scriptures speak of it, "a heavenly kingdom." In Phil. 3:20 the apostle Paul says, "For our citizenship is in heaven."

The Christian becomes a citizen of this spiritual kingdom by virtue of the grace of God. Paul wrote to the Ephesians, "For by grace have ye been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, that no man should glory." (Eph. 2:8-9). It is imperative, however, for man to obey certain commandments of God in order to receive the gift of salvation, which is by grace. For example, man must become a believer in God and in Christ. (Heb. 11:6). Man must repent of all sin. (Acts 2:38). Man must confess Christ as his Lord and Savior. (Matt. 10:32-33; Romans 10:9-10). Man must also be baptized for the remission of sins. (Acts 2:38; Mark 16:15-16). Obedience to these commands simply means that man meets the conditions which the Lord has laid down for the acceptance of the gift of salvation. God's part is the great part in our salvation, but man's obedience is none the less necessary.

In addition, after becoming a Christian, man lives a life that is pure and clean and wholesome. He abstains from the various evils of the world. (Gal. 5:19-21). Still further, the Christian spends his life in doing the things that the Lord wants done. To use an expression found in Titus 3:1, the Christian is "ready unto every good work." "Pure religion and undefiled before our God and Father is this, to visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unspotted from the world." (James 1:27).

Mind of Christ

The Christian is one who has the mind of Christ. As mentioned in Phil. 2:5, "Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." Romans 8:9 puts it, "If any man hath not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his." Col. 1:27 speaks of "Christ in you, the hope of glory." All of these emphasize the importance of man taking on the attitudes and spirit of Christ.

This means that all of the things that Christ taught and lived while here on the earth are to be taken into the life of the Christian. He is to see the world about him through the eyes of the Lord. He is to associate with his fellowmen on the same level of helpful concern which Jesus had. He is to remain free from the evils about him, while trying to influence those about him toward the upward way of life. He is to have compassion upon the sick, the maimed, the halt, and the poor. He is to love and forgive even his enemies. With Christ's mind within him, the values which Christ held become the Christian's values. Christ's attitudes become his attitudes. Christ's manner of life becomes his manner of life.

Conclusion

As we contemplate the whole of Christianity, it is easy to see that while there is certainly a negative attitude toward all forms of evil, the dominant emphasis of Christianity is positive and constructive. The one who is called to Christ is called to leave the world, but also called to turn toward a great new way of life. The early Christians in the apostolic period gave up much, but even more impressive is that which they then embraced. They set their minds and hearts to a great dynamic, challenging new life. As we look back at them let us let our Christianity become the positive constructive Christianity that will influence the world toward Christ, "Abhor that which is evil, cleave to that which is good." (Rom. 12:9). "Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good." (Rom. 12:21). "Hold fast that which is good; abstain from every form of evil." (I Thess. 5:21-22).