

THROUGH ETERNAL YEARS THE SAME

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on December 31, 1967 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

I have often marvelled at the way Christ remains relevant in each generation. Through all of the passing years he has not become outmoded or obsolete. His parables, for example, still carry great power. The prodigal son still reaches into the hearts of millions of people, perhaps because there is some element of the prodigal in each one of us. His story of the good Samaritan still has tremendous force, because in our day, too, it is still easy to pass by on the other side when we see someone in need. Christ's story of the rich man and Lazarus is also meaningful in our time, because the poor continue to be overlooked and neglected much of the time. Christ's system of morals and ethics is still the finest known among men. His life is still the one life that men point to as an ideal. In all these ways Christ continues to be relevant in every generation of time.

For a moment think of how different the centuries have been. Christ was born into the Roman world, yet his life and his teachings were relevant to the needs of men in that day. Then came the Dark Ages, with the feudal system in effect toward its end. Next came the Renaissance, the Reformation, the French Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, the Colonial Period, and other changes throughout the world. In America there was a great period of expansion as the continent was conquered. Then, one of the most significant centuries of all time began, the scientific twentieth century. All of these periods differ greatly in political, economic and social ways, yet Christ has survived through all of them. If there were not something unique about Christianity it would have perished long ago, yet we find it having a great and beneficial effect all across the world, wherever Christ has been preached.

We Can Depend Upon Christ

In a period of great change, such as ours today, when no one is very sure what tomorrow may bring, we are heartened to realize that we can still depend upon Christ and his way of life. The Hebrew writer in the long ago, guided by inspiration, wrote, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yea and forever." (Heb. 13:8). How true this is. It is far truer than the writer could possibly have realized on his own initiative.

We often emphasize this permanence of Christ in our songs. One of the songs which we often sing has in it the very meaningful phrase "through eternal years the same." This is a perfect description of Christ, just as it is a description of God and God's eternal principles. There is another song that we sing almost exclusively at the time of a funeral. The second stanza of Abide With Me reads,

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
Earth's joys grow dim, its glories pass away;
Change and decay in all around I see;
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.

Man's Basic Nature Remains The Same

When we analyze man we discover that his basic needs have always been the same. For example, man must have certain necessities in order for his physical life to survive. These include air, water, food, clothing, shelter, exercise, and rest. Obviously, these are the same elements that were needed in the time of Abraham and in the time of Christ. While it is true that we have a wider variety of food, and we package it quite differently from these earlier times, the basic elements necessary for physical survival are the same.

Man also needs someone to love in order for his life to be full and happy. He must have someone to whom he can give his love and from whom he can receive love. Children come into the world by being born into a family where there are parents who love and care for them. The family with brothers and sisters provides other outlets for love. Later, marriage fulfills other basic needs. Along the line there are friends to add their warmth to one's life. In all of this man must have respect and appreciation or he is not happy or well adjusted.

Man also needs a set of values by which to live. It is unthinkable that a life could be well lived if there were no rights and wrongs, no good, better, and best. If there were nothing bad and nothing good, what a chaos there would be.

Man also needs a challenge for which to live. No people are more unhappy than those who have everything to live with, but nothing to live for. Unfortunately this characterizes many lives of our time. There is no real goal or purpose in a tragic number of cases.

Man also needs someone to worship. If he is not taught concerning the true and living God, he then deifies things, or institutions, or money, or pleasure, or power, or himself. Man is a worshipping being, and he will either worship the right thing, if properly taught, or the wrong thing, if his guidance is neglected.

It is quite significant that for all of these basic needs of man God has made provision. In the creation of the universe he has provided amply for man's physical needs. By arranging the family and its outreach toward friends, God has also established a system whereby man can give and receive love. In Christ especially God has provided man with a meaningful set of values by which to live. In Christ especially God has also provided man a challenge for which to live. This challenge is not only what will make life meaningful, but one that goes on into old age and even to the hour of death. Christ has given us something of eternal significance for which to live and work. Obviously, God has also provided man someone to worship, as he has revealed himself through Christ to man. Christianity fills man's needs and helps him find fulfillment in his life.

But Is Christ Still Relevant?

There are many who would say that in our scientific twentieth century Christ is not still relevant. Let us consider their objection. Notice some interesting evidence. Dr. David Starr Jordan, the first president of Leland Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, wrote a book near the turn of the century which he entitled *The Call of the Twentieth Century*. He predicted that the twentieth century would be one in which all types of reform would be realized--that it would be a time of perfect peace and righteousness, social justice, and the well-being of all men. He could not have been more wrong.

Perhaps we ought to say in his defense that his book was written at a time when men believed in the inevitability of progress. The scientific age was just beginning to blossom, and education was spreading across the land and through all strata of life. Modern man in 1900 assumed that science would discover all the things that were necessary to a utopian life, and that education would spread the word until every problem was solved.

But how has it worked out? Let us note further evidence. In a lecture at George Washington University, Dr. Edward Teller, one of America's foremost scientists, winner of the Nobel Prize in Physics, and eminent professor at the University of California at Berkeley, discussed the problems of our nuclear age. He spoke of the possibility that mankind might destroy itself if it continues down its present road. Dr. Teller then made what seemed to be a very good case for stopping all scientific progress. At that point he turned around and said, "Now, isn't that ridiculous!" No one would seriously advocate the termination of all scientific development. Of course, he was right. He then said that men of science and others must somehow change so that new knowledge and new power can be used for the good of all mankind. But, he did not seem to know how to accomplish this. He had no plan. It is here that Christ must come into our world, furnish a set of ethics, and motivate man to live in the spirit of peace and good will toward all men. Without Christ, our twentieth century is doomed.

Pessimism

Bertrand Russell, one of America's most outspoken philosophers, published an article some months ago on the future of mankind. In this prediction he said that unless something unforeseeable happens before the turn of the century, one of three things will happen. Either there will be the cessation of all human life, possibly of all life on the planet; or, the catastrophic diminution of the population of the globe; or, the unification of the world under a single government. Modern scientists and philosophers have a very pessimistic view of the future of mankind. Man has everything to live with, in our wonderful twentieth century, but he does not have a respect for the God who endowed him with his powers of discovery, and equipped our world with its marvellous potentialities. Christ and his way of life constitute the missing ingredient.

Civilization has fallen because of man's inability to solve the same basic problems that have plagued each generation. One historian states these problems in their most basic form as "men's inability to live at peace with their fellowmen, their inability to find satisfaction, and their constant search for power." Now, instead of affecting only one nation or a few nations at a time, the whole world is affected when men are unable to live together in peace. Whereas wars in previous generations affected only two nations, and some of their immediate neighbors, a breakdown of relationships between governments in our day may affect the entire world. The stakes are high, and the need for a means of leading men to live together in peace is more imperative than ever before. This is why Christianity is so imperative in our twentieth century.

Conclusion

In a difficult period of time our only hope is to follow our Lord. In the long ago Christ on one occasion sifted the multitudes who were eagerly following him for the loaves and fishes which he provided, by telling them of the spiritual nature of his kingdom. As the multitudes melted away there came a moment when only the twelve remained. Jesus asked, "Would ye also go away?" Peter voiced the sentiment of the apostles when he answered, "To whom shall we go? Thou has the words of eternal life." (John 6:67-68).

In our day, too, Christ alone has the words of eternal life. But, it is also more obvious in our time that Christ also has the only workable plan for this world. Because Christ has the answer for eternity, the means by which our souls can be saved, and because Christ has the answer for the here and now, the means by which men can live together happily and in peace, we must follow the Lord. Let us follow in our own individual lives the one who "through eternal years is the same."