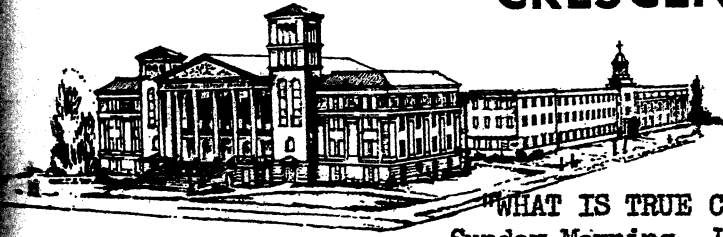


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS



"WHAT IS TRUE CHRISTIANITY?"
Sunday Morning, January 29, 1961
John R. Claypool

One of the most distressing conditions on the American church scene is the divided state of Christendom. In our own country, the various denominational groups number into the hundreds, each reading from the same Bible, pointing to the same Christ, yet giving definite interpretations to eternal matters. Lest you think I am raising a straw man, just spend any Sunday listening to the radio, and then I think you will agree that our times are like the Tower of Babel—utter religious confusion, a thousand voices making a thousand different claims. Little wonder that the intelligent unbeliever turns away in disgust. In this welter of conflict the question honestly arises: "Is there no way to judge these various claims? Is there no norm to which we can appeal and by which we can separate the true from the false? In this day of bewildering denominationalism, is there no means of identifying true Christianity?"

This is a very pertinent question, and I am happy this morning to answer that such a norm does exist. It is found in one of the most famous and beautiful passages in the Bible—the Thirteenth Chapter of I Corinthians. These words can be applied in many different ways. They embody the ideal for personal piety, but they also set forth a reality by which institutional groups can be judged. Tendencies had begun to develop in the one church there in Corinth which have now hardened into definite religious groups. Thus these words of Paul, as he seeks to unravel the mistaken emphases and set forth the true reality, can serve as a helpful criteria in evaluating modern religious claims. Paul begins by stating what Christianity is not.

First of all, he describes the emotional church: "Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels." The exciting phenomena at Pentecost had left a deep impression on the early church, and led some to believe that the primary purpose of Christianity was to provide highly emotional experiences. And there are many groups today who make the same emphasis. Feeling—that is the thing, they say. Unless your religious life is colored with vivid emotional exhilaration, they doubt you have any religion. I heard a Pentecostal evangelist say once: "If you can get it and not know it, you can lose it and not miss it." To many groups, "how high you can hop" is far more important than "how straight you walk."

To this exalted emphasis on emotion, Paul would shake his head and say, "No." Emotion is a part of Christianity, to be sure. The gospel involves the whole man, and emotion is certainly a real part. But that is exactly the point—it is only a part, not the whole. In religion, as in every other area, emotion is a good servant but a poor master. Religion that brings this to "the front and center" can quickly degenerate into a type of physical gratification that has no eternal meaning. To come to religious experience in search of a thrill or exotic satisfaction is to pervert its whole nature. True Christianity puts emotion in its proper place by teaching men to control it. Only then can it truly be enjoyed. If, in our religious practice, we let our emotions run uncontrolled, this same tendency will break out in other areas and destroy us. A river under control is a great blessing; a flooding torrent of the same river is purely destructive. So true Christianity

recognizes the reality of emotion and would harness it in the service of God, but to make it the end and purpose of the church is a perversion.

Next Paul describes the intellectual church: "though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and have all faith." Here is the group that exalts intellectual attainments. They are interested in predicting the future, in defining the Faith, in formulating certain creeds and lists of essential beliefs. To them, the intellectual content of what one believes is the basis of Christianity. The labels "Fundamentalist" or "Radical," "Conservative" or "Liberal" are of great significance to them.

Here again, to this one-sided emphasis, Paul would say, "No." That does not mean that intellectual belief is unimportant. It is very important, for all action is rooted in thought. Yet, as in the case of emotion, the intellect is but a part of the whole personality, and we can sometime insulate our beliefs from the core of our being and be unaffected by them. It is possible for a man to give mental assent to all the facts about Christ—His virgin birth, miracles, vicarious atonement, bodily resurrection—and still be as different from Christ as darkness from day. Some of the most vicious deeds of history have been done by the orthodox in defense of intellectual dogma. In 1553, in the city of Geneva, Switzerland, a man named Servetus was publicly burned at the stake. In the flickering shadows of that scene stood John Calvin, who controlled the life of that city. Calvin said this deed was done "to the glory of God." And what was Servetus' crime? He did not believe in the doctrine of a metaphysical Trinity. Imagine, burning a man at the stake for intellectual disagreement! Yet this can happen so easily when intellectual formulation is central. What we believe can leave untouched a vicious center of life. No, there is a deeper unity in the church than mere mental agreement. To believe in the priesthood of all believers is to accept the possibility of disagreement. Carlyle Marney dedicated his book, Faith In Conflict, this way: "To Victor, who agrees with me in nothing, but is my friend in everything." This is far closer to the Thirteenth Chapter of I Corinthians than was John Calvin. Mere intellectual orthodoxy is not the center.

The third church Paul describes is the activist church: "though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor and give my body to be burned at the stake." Here is "religion with feet to it." This is the church that believes in doing things, having great programs and big budgets and large buildings. It "knocks itself out" in rigorous humanitarian endeavors, and seeks to bring in the Kingdom by sheer vigor and perspiration. This is particularly apropos to many American churches.

Once again, Paul shakes his head. As before, this is one part being substituted for the whole. Activity is fine, and the church by its very nature must implement its ideals in concrete action. And yet, there is more involved than mere outward activity. Why men do things is more important than what they do. Jesus said repeatedly that it was the motive that mattered most. A person can do the right thing for the wrong reason. Giving money is fine, but more important, why was it given? Did it come from a real love for others, or did it come from a real love for self? Many like the glory and praise that come with generosity and give "to be seen of men." Jesus said that such persons "had their reward." In other words, they were not giving anything. They were buying men's approval, just as they would buy a car. And one can hardly expect any eternal credit for "paying his money and taking his choice." You see, outward appearance is never the whole story. What goes on behind the scene and motivates men to act as they do is the most significant part. And for this reason a church that puts the emphasis solely on activity or outward things is off center.

Having now cleared the field of unbalanced emphases, Paul sets forth the true reality. If a church's central emphasis is not to be emotional exhilaration or intellectual formulation or frenzied activity, what is it to be?

Paul uses one word to set forth the reality—love. Not the physical attraction of a man for a woman, not the affection of a child for its mother, not the feeling that exists between friends or in a person for a thing—no, it is that exalted attitude which God has shown to us in Jesus Christ. The only way to describe the love which is the central reality of the Church is to point to a Person. This love once lived among men, manifest itself in every conceivable situation, and thus we have an insight. As Paul set out to define this Reality, he found himself painting a portrait. Just as an artist looks at a model and then seeks to reproduce it on canvas, so Paul looked and wrote, looked and wrote. The terms "Christ" and "Love" fused together, and at any point you could substitute the one for the other and the truth would be the same. This is true Christianity; look at Him or listen; it is all the same;

"Love (Christ) suffereth long, and is kind; love (Christ) envieth not, love (Christ) vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up; doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own; is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth; Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things. Love (Christ) never fails."

There you have it, and it is nothing but a portrait of Jesus of Nazareth. For you see, Christianity is Christ and Christ is Christianity! He excites the emotions, illuminates the intellect, and motivates the activity. That quality of life that made itself felt through Him is the very essence of our faith. And wherever you find men and women who are controlled by that Life and in whom that Love shines, there is a true church. And wherever that is missing, I do not care how emotional the congregation or how orthodox the theology, or how active the program, or how impressive the building, mark it down: they are out of touch with "the real thing." Are you confused by the multiplicity of churches? I will give you the acid test: do you find at the very heart of their fellowship the kind of love described in I Corinthians 13, or better still, seen in Jesus Christ? This is the "sine qua non"—"without which there is nothing."

And that brings me to the crucial question—what about us? We are a church, we make claims, we set forth beliefs, we have a huge building, we sponsor an active program. But are we an expression of true Christianity? That is the question. At the beginning of the sermon, some of you may have thought: "He is going to claim we are right—everybody else is wrong." But you were mistaken. I have set forth what I think true Christianity is, but I am asking you for the answer. "Is that what we are?" And I have reason for doing this; you see, I cannot answer this question alone. You are the church, and whether or not we conform to this Reality depends on whether or not you take Him seriously. Therefore, this is not just an institutional question; it is personal. It stands or falls on individuals like you and me, and whether or not we are controlled by this "Jesus-Love" Reality.

Years ago a pioneer missionary went to interior South America, and began to witness to this love. The work was slow and hard, but gradually he built a following, and became affectionately known in the whole territory as "the Jesus man." He used an old motor boat to travel up and down the river, and as the sound of that boat would be heard, the jungle drums would spread the word, and all around you would hear the sound which meant to the natives: "The Jesus man, the Jesus man, the Jesus man."

"WHAT IS TRUE CHRISTIANITY?"
January 29, 1961

Page 4

And you know, I wonder, as our church sends out sounds to our community, do they mean to the hearers: "The Jesus man, the Jesus man, the Jesus man"? They should, for He is true Christianity!