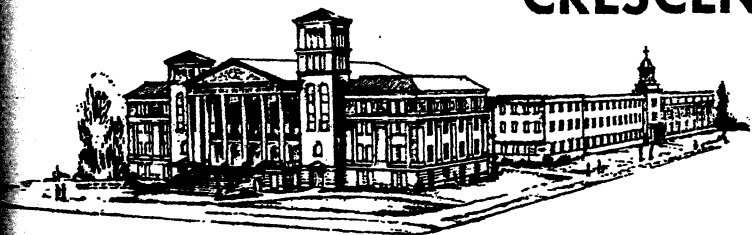


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS



"THE WAGER OF FAITH"

Sunday Morning, May 7, 1961
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
John R. Claypool

I heard once of a pioneer missionary who took the Gospel for the first time to a primitive tribe of people. After he established personal rapport with them, he decided the best approach would be to translate the New Testament into their own dialect. He began this task, but soon encountered an obstacle, for he could find no expression in their language that corresponded with the verb "believe." He tried to work around it and go on, but finally gave up, for without this strategic expression the message could not be conveyed.

This experience points up graphically the importance of the verb "believe." It is not only used a number of times; its meaning is basic to a right understanding of Christianity. If it were excluded from the Christian vocabulary, the concept of salvation would be inexplicable, for the two go "hand in hand" in the Scriptures. When the Phillipian jailer asked his famous question, this word is the key to Peter's answer: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shall be saved." The word figures prominently in John 3:16, often called "Everybody's Text": "That whosoever believeth on Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life." When a group of Jews asked Jesus what they must do to work the work of God, Jesus gives this word absolute significance: "This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent." (John 6:29) Thus, it is quite obvious that this is one of the basic fundamentals, an irreducible minimum "without which there is nothing." The missionary simply had to find an equivalent expression, and so must we be constantly "on the lookout" for means of conveying this truth.

I think I have found one, and in a most unsuspected place. This week, like all Louisvillians, I have encountered on every hand evidence of the Kentucky Derby. Reference to it has dominated all the news media, and one could not escape seeing signs of it at every juncture. Last Thursday night I had a rather embarrassing experience that betrayed I was a "newcomer." I was going down to the Baptist Hospital after supper, and as I came to the corner of Broadway and Barret, I saw police blockading the street and diverting traffic. I went on and made my calls and when I came back the same procedure was in effect. Frankly, I was alarmed. I thought maybe a riot had started or a bomb had gone off; so I parked my car and rushed back to ask the policeman. I wish you could have seen his face when I asked him what was the matter. He looked like he wanted to know what part of "the sticks" I was from and just when I had joined the human race. "Look, buddy," he answered, "this is the night of the Derby Parade. We've just been doing this for fifty years." I did not wait for anymore. My alarm changed to chagrin, my white face now red, I picked up my ignorance and went home. Next year I shall remember to drive on and not ask any questions.

Yes, this event has completely dominated our city, and though I know it sounds strange coming from a Baptist preacher, I see in one of its facets an analogy for the New Testament concept of belief. The practice to which I have reference is the practice of wagering. Now while I am by no means the first Christian interpreter to see this parallel, I realize that this is a rather risky comparison, for someone may get the notion I am condoning the practice of gambling. Let me make it emphatically clear that I am not. There are far better uses to which money can be put than betting on horses. In a world of crying human need, it is a sad spectacle to see millions of dollars thrown away for no constructive purpose. Then, too, the whole idea of trying to get something for nothing is basically false! Thus, the Christian view of stewardship and vocation absolutely rules out the practice for me. However, that is not my main point this morning. Rather, in the fine tradition of Pascal and Kierkegaard and even the apostle Paul, I want to lift out this aspect of the Derby event and use it to clarify the Gospel. In what way can the act of faith be compared to a wager?

Looked at in formal terms, the phenomena of wagering could be defined like this: it is opinion translated into action. A man reaches a conclusion, and he is willing to do something about it. He backs up the opinion with a certain value, and injects it into the realm of risk. The only side of the matter that interests me is this willingness to move out of the realm of idea. Here the betting man acts on the basis of his belief. He dares to become involved, even in the face of risks.

Seen from this perspective, it is a very accurate picture of New Testament belief, for here, too, we have opinion translated into action. There is no clearer definition of "believing in Jesus" than these words: I will stake my life on Jesus Christ. This goes beyond mere intellectual assent, just as wagering is more than "having a hunch." It is projecting ideas into the realm of activity; a willingness to act upon what one professes to believe.

This has been a point of great confusion in the history of the church. There has been a persistent tendency to limit belief to the sphere of the intellect. Thus, Christianity becomes an academic exercise, a kind of speculative gymnastic. And it can become detached altogether from life, leaving the vital core of being untouched.

When only the facts about Jesus are important, it is possible to "believe" all the fundamentals, and at the same time be controlled by values that are the exact antithesis. A good example of this is the fact that one of the boats that transported slaves from Africa to Europe was named "The Good Ship Jesus", and its owner and captain was known to read his Bible and pray daily. One can believe all the facts and have none of the spirit of Christ.

This cannot be the New Testament doctrine of belief. On the contrary, belief involves all of life, not just the mind. It controls every facet of life, including the core of being. Of course, what one believes is important, but faith goes beyond that. It acts according to belief. Just as getting on an airplane is more than merely believing that one could be transported through the air, so belief is more than opinion. The one is included in the other, but is only a part.

Thus, I believe a wager is a valid analogy of belief because it brings together both truth and action. It is belief in motion, willing to involve itself in face of risks. And it is against this background that we can best understand what it means to "believe in Jesus." It is staking one's life on the opinion that Jesus is right. For time and eternity one sets Him up as ultimate. This means accepting His teaching, following His leading, and giving ourselves to the values He exalted. It is committing ourselves to the belief that what He demands will lead to fulfillment and what He says is in a one-to-one relationship with Reality.

There is risk involved, for every selection is exclusive. It means that we shall move in a certain direction, and become some things and not others. So when one commits himself to Christ, he "puts all his eggs in one basket", and stakes his life on the rightness of Christ. If Jesus is wrong, the follower will be wrong for all eternity. It is commitment that carries eternal implications.

But, after all, one has to make some choice. There is no such thing as an absolutely uncommitted man. Every person gives himself to some value, and thus is molded in its image. Nathaniel Hawthorne's story of the great stone face is true to life. We become like those things we admire. And the question comes: On what or on whom will I stake my life? Some say money; some—fame; some—pleasure; some—knowledge. Each man selects some value, even if unconsciously, and so is molded by it. And the Christian says: "Of all the alternates in life, I select Jesus. I shall not only believe He existed; I shall take His leadership as ultimate in my life. I will listen to Him, obey His commands and strive to become like Him. I think the way of Jesus is the best way to fulfill this life; I believe the way of Jesus is the best preparation for the life to come."

I began with the story of a missionary in search of a word. Halted by his inability to find this key expression, he laid aside his translation. But one day a native walked into his office and sat down in a chair. He used a word that meant: "I rest my whole weight" in this chair. Instantly the missionary said, "I've got it! That's the word I've been praying for." Faith is "resting one's whole weight" in Christ. And that is right. Believing the chair would hold him, he put his opinion into action. By this means, the missionary was able to communicate the Gospel, just as I have tried to do this Derby weekend by the word "wager."

But the whole question is this: Will you stake your life on Jesus? Will you make Him ultimate for time and eternity? Will you wager your life that Jesus is right? The stakes are high, and only you can give the answer.