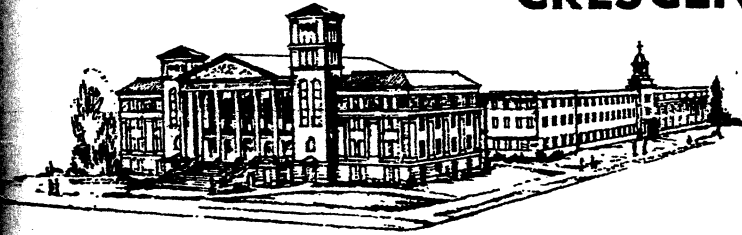


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS



"CHRISTIANITY: REALITY OR FANTASY?"

Sunday Morning, November 19, 1961
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
John R. Claypool

From the moment of its inception, the Christian religion has been "under fire." Attacks against it have been launched from every conceivable angle. And we who are its adherents would be greatly remiss if we did not attempt to give some answer to these onslaughts. We are obliged both to propagate and to defend our faith, and this morning my purpose is to do the latter. I want us to consider a most significant argument against Christianity, and then try to establish the answer of faith.

The argument I have in mind is one of the oldest in history. It has been voiced in every age, and its very persistence is a testimony to its cogency. You can find it in the documents of antiquity, or you may hear it in the jargon of our modern world. Just the other day I encountered it on the lips of a college senior. She was telling me her problems of religious doubt. Her words went like this: "I used to think that God created man. Now I have decided man created God. As I look about at all the differences in religious opinion, it seems that the whole thing is a figment of imagination. Men believe what they want to believe; they project their wishes into dogma. I hate to say it to a minister, but I think religion is simply make-believe; it is spoofing on a grand scale." Here was the classic indictment: that religion is subjectively conceived. Instead of being objectively real, religion is simply a game men play with themselves. It is "building air castles," and nothing more.

I did not ask her where she got this idea; it could have been in any number of places. She might have picked it up in the field of psychology, reading someone like Sigmund Freud. His great word for religion was "illusion." He spoke of it as "the composite dreams of mankind," what men wish were true but is not. "See The Future of an Illusion and Civilization and Its Discontents". Or she could have run into it while reading in nineteenth century philosophy. Back in 1841 a writer by the name of Ludwig Feuerbach shocked the continent with a book on this very theme. (The Essence of Christianity). He said that "man is the beginning, the center, and the end of religion." Then he proceeded to explain every Christian doctrine in terms of human desire. Men were confused by the mystery of life, so they made up the idea of "God" to explain it. They were lonely and obscure, so they pictured Him as a "father who loved them." They were guilty, so they concocted the element of "forgiveness." They were overwhelmed by life, so they dreamed up "providence." They dreaded non-existence, so they created the doctrine of "immortality." On and on he went, showing that theology is really anthropology, and that Christianity is simply the frustrated hope of man projected on a cosmic screen. But again, my friend quite possibly got the idea from the political writings of Karl Marx. His estimate of religion is well-known: it is the "opiate of the people." He described it as the "reflex" of men to the hardships and disillusionments of the present. Their lot was made endurable because of hope for "pie in the sky by and by." He viewed religion as the great enemy to his call for revolution, and dismissed it as "a psychological illusion" that would fade

away if earthly conditions improved. (See Capital: A Critique of Political Economy). Or she could easily have come across it in contemporary literature, for here too, religion is depicted as an escape for the weak. The main motif in all of Eugene O'Neill's plays is that illusion is the only thing that makes life bearable, and he would include religion as one form of this. A character in a modern novel states it perfectly: "Religion is nothing but a chloroform mask into which the weak and unhappy stick their faces."

Yes, she could have gotten the idea almost anywhere, for it is all around. This is a classic objection, ever old but ever new. And do not for one minute underestimate its power. It goes to the very heart of religious experience. This is no peripheral issue. If this charge is correct, then it undermines the validity of all that we are doing in the Church. Its threat is an ultimate one, "an axe laid to our very roots." If our religion does begin within and not without, if it is rooted in the subjective and not the objective, then at this moment we are doing nothing more than spinning fantasy. It could be characterized by the old song title: "You Tell Me Your Dream, I'll Tell You Mine."

How can we answer this charge of illusionism? What can we say to this massive attack that is being aimed at our very heart? In making a reply, I must draw a distinction between "religion-in-general" and the Christian religion. If we are speaking about the former, about that infinite variety of experiences that men claim to have had, then I must concede the truth of the objection. For much that passes in the name of religion is the wishes of men objectified. Back during the war we heard a lot about "fox hole religion." Men who had never given God a thought suddenly began to pray with unctious. They were frightened to death; they wanted to be delivered; so they cried out in panic. Then, too, there is that regrettable religious song: "If I Am Dreaming, Let Me Dream On." Here is positive proof of what the antagonists are saying - a man who would rather drift on in his self-chosen illusion than to be awakened to the facts of reality. Or who can listen to some of our most cherished Negro spirituals and deny the element of wish-fulfillment? These words are etched in pathos, for they reflect the utter poverty of slave life. Here is a man who has had to work all his life in bare feet, so how does he conceive the next life? "I got shoes, you got shoes, all God's chillun got shoes." Here is a woman who has never had any decent clothes, so she sings: "I gotta robe...." Here are folk who were never free to move about as they pleased, so they sing: "I'm gonna walk all over God's Heab'n." I do not mean to be overcritical here, but simply acknowledge the presence of projected desire. If one is speaking about religion-in-general, then there is substance to the charge.

But my answer is quite different when one speaks of the Christian religion. What can be said about religion-in-general simply does not accord with the facts about the religion of Jesus. When you examine this particular body of beliefs, the idea of wish-fulfillment does not stand up.

To substantiate this defense, let me adopt the procedure of the courtroom and set before you four pieces of evidence. We can call them exhibits A, B, C, and D if you like. If you will examine them carefully, the case is quite convincing.

Exhibit A is the life and teachings of Christ. As you listen to what He says and observe what He does, do you get the impression that He is retreating into illusion? Is He making things up simply to find comfort from life's hardships? In point of fact, the very opposite is true. Look carefully: His troubles did not create His religion; His religion created His troubles. Instead of being a way of escape, His religion was

the cause of suffering. If He had been interested only in spinning fantasy, He would hardly have structured a religion that ended in a cross! No, as He moves through the pages of the New Testament, it is obvious that He was following an outward destiny and not an inner desire. The demand of His God cut directly across His path of self-interest. No One who sobbed out in prayerful agony, "Not my will but Thine be done," can be accused of "wishful thinking." His religion did not consist of wishful thinking; it consisted of costly imperative from beyond. Anyone who tries to explain the religion of the Crucified One as wishful fantasy is simply blind to the implications of the facts.

Exhibit B is the experience of the apostle Paul. This one has left a vivid imprint on Christianity, for his letters are a large part of our original document. Does his example give evidence of wish-projection? To answer this we must recall his pre-Christian experience. He was a zealous Jew, a rising young theologian, a man destined to be the leader of his race and native religion. When some began to follow this Jesus of Nazareth, Paul turned against them with all the fury of his soul. He set out to destroy this heresy and preserve the religion of his fathers. But in the process of carrying out such a mission, he had an earth-shaking experience. Was it wish-fulfillment? Did he discover on the Damascus Road what he had always hoped was true? Quite to the contrary! He confronted the last thing in the world he could have wanted to know - that Jesus was the Messiah, that the Christians, not his people, were right. It meant the loss of everything he had achieved up to that time - religion, status, family, everything. But he changed, and Saul the persecutor became Paul the apostle. The rest of his life was filled with hardship - beating, shipwreck, discouragement, imprisonment, and finally martyrdom. But this was Paul's experience. Honestly, now, does wishful thinking explain such a life? Here is additional proof that something from beyond and not within was the driving Force. Had Paul been following his own desire, he would surely have remained a Jew.

Exhibit C is the character of the early church. They lived in a day when the Roman Empire was in full control. Emperor worship was the law of the land, and to deviate from this was a crime of treason. Yet that is exactly what the early Christian did. What made them do it? It is rather hard to believe they willed such a course on their own. Most men prefer living to dying, and they would hardly manufacture a religion that inevitably led to a colosseum and the lions. If it had been left to their wishes, they would certainly not have chosen martyrdom. But they did die by the hundreds, not because they wanted to but because they were obedient to a heavenly vision. The heroic action of the early church is hard to explain as mere wishful fantasy. They were compelled from without, not within.

Exhibit D is your experience. Let me ask you an honest question: If you were making up your own religion, would it be the same as Christianity? I am sure mine would not. I would picture God, not as exacting holiness, but as indulgent weakness. There would be no judgment, no hell, no punishment in my wishes. I would say nothing about self-sacrifice or denying myself. I would certainly not talk about loving my enemy or turning the other cheek. You see, there is quite a bit in Christianity that "goes against the grain." It does offer hope and peace and joy, to be sure; but it also demands that which is contrary to man's instinct. Therefore, to write it off as projected wishes is to shut your eyes to the facts. There is much here that no selfish nature would desire.

Here, then, is the evidence. Exhibit A is Jesus Christ - His religion led Him to a cross. Exhibit B is Paul - his religion made him leave security and status for a life of suffering. Exhibit C is the early church - their religion caused them "to be

fed to the lions." Exhibit D is our own experience - and we know what Christ demands is not always what we want. What does all this add up to? The fact that Christianity is not a wishful fantasy. You can say what you will, this body of evidence is no dreamy air castle patterned after our own wishes.

Therefore, I repeat that the classic charge is justified in relation to some religion, but not to true Christianity. In its essential form, it can never be explained as "what men wish were true but is not." To the contrary, it is a naked Reality that breaks in from without, demanding rather than fulfilling.

And this is why Christian conversion is always an act of surrender. Becoming a Christian is not embracing fantasy; it is accepting Reality. This is illustrated perfectly in the experience of C. S. Lewis, who I deem to be the most significant Christian convert of the twentieth century. This professor of English at Cambridge moved through a long period of acknowledged atheism. He had a thousand reasons for saying that Christianity was invalid. But as time went on he felt a pursuing Presence, much like Frances Thompson's "Hound of Heaven." Everything betrayed him - books, friends, and contemplation. His attitude was not: "I wish it were true but I am afraid it is not." Rather, it was: "I am afraid it is true but I wish it were not." He wanted to be left alone, to have his way, not to be interfered with. But one night it happened, and he entered the kingdom, not by wish-fulfillment, but by surrender to the God of truth. This is Christianity at its authentic best - not man's creative fantasy but God's creative revelation.

Thus, in my mind one question is settled. Christianity is not man-made fantasy; it is what Christ claimed: "The Truth" (John 14:6). But there is another question to be settled - what about you? What is the origin of your religious opinions? Are they realities that break in upon you from without, or are they concepts that you have structured out of your own desire? Religion can be fantasy, but this is not Christianity. What about you? Are you religious, or are you a Christian?