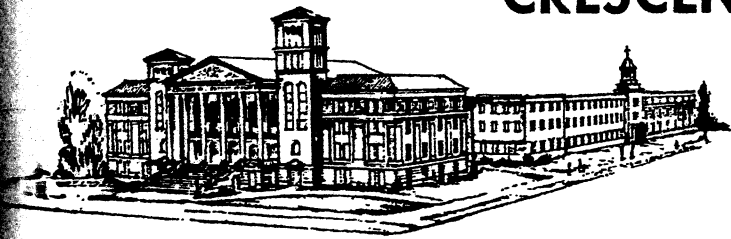


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"THE MOTIVE OF MISSIONS"



Sunday Morning, December 3, 1961
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
John R. Claypool

Scriptural Reference: Matthew 28:18-20; Romans 10:11-17

In January of 1956, five independent missionaries were killed in the jungle of interior Ecuador. They died at the hands of the people they were trying to evangelize - a fierce tribe called the Auca Indians. The news of this tragedy was given wide circulation in the American press, and it was interesting to observe the reactions of the public at large. Many were openly critical of the whole endeavor. A letter to the editor in Time magazine read like this: "What happened to those young missionaries is regrettable, but why did they ever go in the first place? Those natives were known to be savage creatures who hated outsiders. They had their own religion; why not leave them as they are?" The letter closed with this sentiment: "Let us use all our efforts to improve our own country, and leave the people of Ecuador to whatever God they believe in."

Now such an attitude falls as strange sound on Southern Baptist ears, for from her earliest history our denomination has been militantly missionary in outlook. The Great Commission has been so much a part of our thinking that we may not have sensed that others did not share our opinion. But this is precisely the case; for much as we may be loathe to admit it, that letter in Time depicts a prevailing attitude in our present day. There are many who have real question about the validity of the whole mission enterprise. On the one hand is the voice of religious relativism. Like the writer of the letter, many affirm that "one religion is as good as another," and look on the effort to convert as the height of presumptive arrogance. On the other hand, there is protest from those at whom missionary effort is directed. They identify missions with Western colonialism, and as the young nations throw off the foreign yoke they become suspicious of missions as well. In the early days of India's independence, the church was looked on as a means of maintaining Western domination, and it came as little surprise that the government forbade by law any religious proselyting. Here are voices both within and without, and they demand of us a soul-searching reappraisal of the whole matter. When people here are asking, "Why do you go?" and when people there are asking, "Why do you come?", we cannot escape the ultimate question: "What is the motive of missions?" Why do we send hundreds of people and millions of dollars in the face of such objections? This is a crucial issue, and we can neither "beg the question" nor "assume the answer." In this day of relativism and nationalism, how can we justify what we have been doing for so long?

Quite obviously, the matter cannot be settled by pointing to "a proof text." Those who are raising the protests have not submitted themselves to Biblical authority, and therefore will not rest the discussion there. Rather, we must penetrate into the essence of Christianity, for only in laying bare what we are can we find an explanation for what we are doing.

In thinking through this problem, I want to build our discussion around two words: truth and love. Back of the missionary endeavor is a concern for truth and the dictates of love. It is, to adapt Paul's phrase, an attempt "to speak the truth in love" (Ephesians 4:15).

Now as we consider the first of these concepts, we must face squarely the problem of religious knowledge. Is one religion as good as another? Are all the world faiths simply variations of a single theme? Are they the various branches of one tree or different roads to the same destination? Is, after all, sincerity the main religious virtue? If a man "lives up to the light" that he possesses, is that enough?

All of this has a pleasant ring to it, and is particularly appealing to the tolerant sophistication that is so common today. It sounds like a wonderful solution to all the bigotry that has inhered in partisan religion. But there is one big fault - it does not square with the cold, hard facts. In the last fifty years, the religions of the world have been studied more intensely than ever before, and out of this amassing of information distinctions have emerged. Of course, there are similarities among them. Each has points of particular strength and has produced individuals of saint-like quality. But when you put them down side by side, the differences are not of degree but of kind. There are crucial distinctions at significant places - the idea of God, the nature and destiny of man, and the meaning of human existence. For example, the prophet Mohammed proclaimed "Allah, the only true and living God"; the prophet Buddha is silent about God altogether. In the Jewish religion, monotheism or the idea of one God is central: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord they God is one Lord, and Him only shall you serve" (Deuteronomy 6:4); however, in the Hindu system there are an infinite number of deities in the pantheon. Or again, Buddhism declares all matter to be evil and demands the negation of desire, while Christianity affirms that creation is good and desires are to be fulfilled according to God's intention. You see, there are staggering and significant differences that explode this pleasant synthesis. To affirm that all religions are basically the same is either to defy the facts or deny that the facts have any meaning. The alternatives are ignorance or a thoroughgoing skepticism that invalidates all religious truth. Now very few of us are willing to assume such absolute nihilism. We are constrained to believe that there is some Reality behind religious experience that gives it a valid meaning. Therefore, if there is some significance to these beliefs and they are obviously contradictory by nature, we are forced to admit that all religions cannot be the same. Just as two plus two cannot be four and six at the same time, so a judgment must be made between conflicting religious opinions.

But how do you determine which of the claims are true and which are false? To answer this, we must notice the particular nature of religious knowledge. It is personal and not factual by nature. It is created by encounter and not by logic or measurement. Its certainty is within and not without. If I say a flower has four petals, the certainty is in the object and can be proved. But if I say the flower is beautiful, the certainty is in the subject and can only be shared. Both certainties are real, but they come about in a different way and are communicated differently. And so it is with all spiritual certainty: it is personal through and through. It comes only through personal experience and is conveyed only through personal testimony. Therefore, the ultimate authentication of religious truth is not by man but by God. He alone can distinguish truth from falsity, and this through an encounter in the depth of the person. It is not left for me to sift through the evidence and arrive at a conclusion; only God can reveal God, and He is

the One who gives truth its ring of reality.

This clarifies the role of a missionary. He is not a dispenser of religious certainty, but a witness to his own experience. He does not argue or compare or debate; he simply tells what God has done in Christ. Since the certainty did not originate with him, he cannot give it to another. All he can do is bear his testimony, and pray that as certainty was born in him through the witness of another, so may certainty come through his words.

The realization of this fact came as a great relief to me several years ago. In 1955, I traveled for several months in foreign countries and saw many places that practiced religions contrary to mine. And as a human I felt so utterly helpless. How could I establish my message? Was not mine just one man's opinion against another? Then I realized this was not for me to do; the authentication in my own experience had come from God, and He alone could make my words "His Word."

So the missionary does not go forth with a superior attitude or claim that his religion is better than another. He has the humility that is born of grace; he has not achieved anything to boast about; he has merely received a revelation that he has found meaningful and wants to share it as a positive witness. The authentication is up to God, and the superior value is to be decided by the one who receives it. I believe that Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, the only means of salvation, but these are not my first words to the non-Christian. I do not swagger up and say: "You are wrong and I am right." This would affect his ego and put him on the defensive. Rather, I share with him the positive affirmation of Christ, and let him make the value judgment. This was clearly the approach of Jesus and the early apostles. They did not go out to argue comparative religion; they went as joyful witnesses. When Jesus dealt with the woman of Samaria, He refused to debate with her the relative merits of the Samaritan mountain and the Jewish mountain; He spoke to her in terms of "Living Water," and won her by the affirmative approach (John 4:10). The same is true in the book of Acts; the one time Paul tried to debate religions there at Athens, it was a miserable failure (Acts 17:16-34). When he resolved "to know nothing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (I Corinthians 2:2) and preached Him with forceful conviction, Christ became "the power of God unto salvation to all that believed" (Romans 1:16).

Therefore, the mission enterprise is grounded in a belief that religious truth is knowable, that it is given by God in encounter, and that it can be shared with others by testimony. There is no exclusive arrogance here that superimposes one set of human opinions on another. Only God can give authentication; He is the Confirmer of His own truth. The missionary goes not in pride of achievement, but with the humbleness of an unworthy beggar that has been given the Bread of Life and wants to share it with other beggars.

The other concept is love, and its relation to the task has already been intimated. Mission activity is not a type of spiritual imperialism that longs to dominate and extend its own power; it is an act of self-giving love that wants only to share its good fortune. The end result of the Christian religion is the reality of love, and it is love's very nature to be concerned for someone else. I agree with the judgment of Dr. Kenneth Scott Latourette that for all its failures and shortcomings, the mission movement of the Christian religion is perhaps the finest example of unselfish sacrifice for other people that our world has ever seen. By far the great majority of missionaries have gone out because they loved others more

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than they loved themselves and could not be content until someone else had participated in the glory to be found in Jesus Christ. As I heard one mission appointee say in the Seminary chapel: "My reason for going overseas is as simple as this: I think everyone has a right to know what I have learned through Christ." Missions at their best are not expressions of haughty pride, but rather bridges of honest love across which truth can move from one heart to another.

This brings me back to my original defense: in the fact of relativism and nationalism, the motive of missions is this: to speak the truth in love. There is nothing here of which to be ashamed; this is not arrogant pride that wishes to lord it over everyone else. It is the Church being what she must be in light of God's action. To have received His truth and to be laid hold of by His love will inevitably result in missions. Just as surely as you would share your food with your hungry child, he who knows Christ and loves as He loves will want to share Him.

If you have no such inclination, one of two things is wrong. You either have not experienced the truth there is in Christ, or the love which is His essence has not gained control of you. For you see, authentic Christian experience is missions, and missions is authentic Christianity.

Are you mission-minded? It is another way of asking: are you a Christian?

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