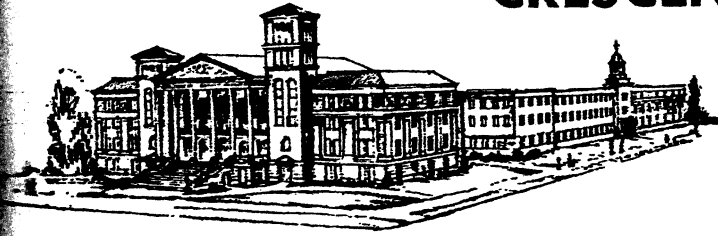


# CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

## SERMONS

"ETERNAL TRUTH IN TEMPORAL FORM"



Sunday Morning, December 10, 1961  
Crescent Hill Baptist Church  
Louisville, Kentucky  
John R. Claypool

I was downtown a few weeks ago and met a friend who is not a Christian. As we talked over a cup of coffee, he said: "By the way, I read about your Baptist convention in Danville last week." And then with a wry smile on his face he added: "I was exceedingly interested in the issues you discussed." Without his saying another word, I knew exactly what he had in mind, for the newspaper account one day during the convention had this caption in big letters: "Women Granted Right To Speak By Baptists." Now this man did not have a bitter or vicious spirit; he was simply an intelligent twentieth century American who was observing Christianity from without. However, behind this gentle prodding, I detected a disturbing image: I see ourselves as others see us. And I left that conversation in real bewilderment, asking myself just what kind of impression is the Church making on the non-Christian world of today?

The chain of thought that began that day is the basis for the sermon this morning. I want you to think with me about some of the implications that grow out of this situation. Here was an issue discussed by a religious gathering: should women be allowed to speak. Here was the obvious reaction of a man outside the Christian fold. What can we say to this one about this problem? Let us frame two answers.

First, let us acknowledge that such an issue is not at the throbbing heart of our times. In a day of nuclear destruction and rampant materialism and violent racism, the matter of whether one of female gender can articulate in public can hardly be called crucial. And having made this specific confession, let us go on to admit the general fact that this is a characteristic of the modern church; all too often she is found "majoring on the minors." Why is the Church today so ineffective in the world? Because she has exhausted her energies on second-rate causes. She used to be in the vanguard of moral leadership, but now the locus of initiative has shifted to the courthouse and independent, secular movements. The Church no longer finds herself in the center of things because she has refused to plant her witness there. Rather, for fear of upsetting someone or having to suffer numerical loss, she has remained safely out on the fringes, answering only those questions that nobody is asking and dodging the critical issues of our times. After interviewing a modern religious leader, a reporter described him as "standing pigeon-toed behind the pulpit and straddling the fence on every issue." And this is too often the posture the Church assumes in the eyes of the world. In the great areas of social and intellectual life, the Church has been a follower and not a leader. Ralph McGill, publisher of the Atlanta Constitution, put it this way: Instead of being like a fire engine, that rushes to the middle of a crisis to affect the cause, the Church has been like an ambulance, coming along after everything has happened to pick up the pieces." How foreign this is to her Founder, who was always at the storm center of controversy. You never found Jesus out in "the swamp of irrelevance." He was

ever at those cutting edges of significance - cleansing the Temple, challenging the status quo, leading the column of moral progress. Of course, it got Him a cross; He did not have what the Church possesses today - success with the crowd. But then, neither does the Church have what He possessed. There is a story about a medieval procession passing before the Pope. As all the grandeur and finery paraded by, the Pope remarked to a friend: "No longer need the church say: 'Silver and gold have I none.'" To which the visitor replied: "No, but no longer can the church say: 'In the name of Jesus of Nazareth, rise up and walk.'" Yes, in order to gain one thing we have sacrificed something else. We have substituted success for suffering; we have carefully avoided the costly, controversial areas; we have chosen to stay out on the fringes; therefore, it should come as no great surprise that the main stream of contemporary life flows past the Church, leaving her unnoticed over there in the backwater. And incidents such as these largely explain this condition. In our preoccupation with the trivial and unimportant, we are losing the right to be heard. Our first answer is to acknowledge the secondary nature of this issue.

But there is a second answer to make to our non-Christian friend. This issue not only illustrates irrelevancy; it points up a mistaken approach to the Christian religion that needs to be clarified. Now many of you probably cannot see how letting women speak in church has anything at all to do with Christianity. But actually it reflects a fundamental problem that we face, a problem that grows directly out of the unique nature of our faith. Now let me make this perfectly clear: Christianity is a historical religion. Our source of truth is not in mysticism, where the soul by intuition apprehends Ultimate Reality. Neither is it in a disciplined reflection, where one observes life and deducts principles therefrom. Rather, we look to certain events in history where God has disclosed Himself. The "salvation drama," to which the Bible is the inspired witness, is the ground spring of our faith. Beginning with Abraham, and moving through the history of Israel until "the Word became flesh," God has revealed Himself through what He has done. This means that eternal truth has appeared in temporal form; the Divine vertical has intersected the human horizontal. And in each of these "saving events" there is both unique spiritual life and the historic setting in which it takes place. Abraham's experience is a revelation of God, but he remained a man of his own particular day. And even Jesus, who was "the visible image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:18), was also a Palestinian Jew who lived and thought and spoke like people of the first century. Both elements are there - the eternal and the temporal - like a plant reflects both the seed and soil in which it grows. And our problem is this: how to distinguish the eternally relevant from "the earthen vessel" in which it is found. I do not mean that we try to abstract "timeless truths" that have no form; rather, we seek to understand the essential reality and translate it into the forms of our day.

I believe I can clarify this problem by pointing to a familiar passage in John's Gospel (13:1-20). The setting is the Last Supper, where Jesus is trying to prepare the disciples for the final ordeal. However, a sullen atmosphere pervades, for all day the men have been quarreling among themselves about who would be first in the coming kingdom. Two had been presumptive enough to ask for special favor, and the rest were indignant at such aggressiveness. They trooped in the room like swelled-up school boys, and the spirit was so competitive that no one was willing to perform the service of foot washing. Now because the roads were dusty and the sandals were open, it was the custom in that day for a slave to wash the feet of guests when they entered a house. Since this band had no servants, they probably "traded turns about" doing this task. But not this night! Everyone was too sensitive and "status conscious" to condescend to this role. So after the meal was under way and Jesus sensed

that He was getting nowhere, He abruptly got up and did the unexpected - He took the basin and towel and began to wash their feet Himself. This was unheard of - for a rabbi to become a slave to his learners, but Jesus was affirming one of His central themes; namely, that life in His kingdom consisted of service and not status. Men were to forget themselves and their pride, and be willing to do anything for their brothers. And when He finished, the atmosphere was not only changed but a vivid example had been set. And He instructed them: "Ye should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15). Now the question is: how do I obey that command? By literally washing your feet, or by being willing to sacrifice myself and serve you in any way I can? The latter answer is obvious by right. There is nothing sacred about the custom of washing feet, but there are a thousand ways that self-giving humility can express itself. Washing feet was simply the historical medium that Jesus used; the important thing is the spiritual reality that shines through it. It is significant to note in Acts that the early church embodied this reality of sacrificial service but did not perpetuate the rite of washing feet.

This clarifies how we are to interpret the Scriptures. Being true to Christ does not mean reproducing all the customs and practices of the first century. It is not that period in history that is significant; it is what happened in Jesus Christ. Here is truth that is applicable to every day and to all men, but it must be adapted to different forms. In point of fact, we cannot turn back the clock and recapture life as it was lived in the first century. To attempt to do so leads to hopeless contradiction, and in my mind misses the whole point of Christianity.

I was talking one day to a minister of another denomination about the new church his congregation was building. He showed me the plans, and it promised to be a lovely modern plant. They had stained glass windows, wall-to-wall carpet, air-conditioning and everything. With a twinkle in my eye I asked: "Where are the organ and piano to go?" He snapped back: "You know we do not believe in instrumental music in the church!" "Why?", I asked innocently. He answered heatedly: "Because the New Testament makes no mention of instruments. We speak where the Bible speaks and are silent where the Bible is silent." I could not resist asking: "Where in the New Testament do you find anything about windows or carpets or air-conditioning or even church buildings?" If you are going to be consistent, none of the practices of modern life are the same as that day. This is the logical end of such literalism. It is folly indeed to ignore the historical nature of Christianity, and try to fulfill its essence by reproducing past customs. Again I affirm that the treasure of the Gospel is found in earthen vessels, and we are to translate its essence and not duplicate its form. To distinguish between the eternal and temporal, the permanent and the passing - this is the first rule in interpreting a historical religion such as ours.

It is in this light that I approach the particular problem that concerned us in Danville. When Paul wrote in I Corinthians (14:34-35) and I Timothy (2:11-15) about women keeping silent in the churches, he reflects the social customs of the first century. In that day women occupied a very lowly station in life; their role was a subordinate one in every case. No woman would speak in public except one of loose morals, and Paul did not want the slightest suspicion of shame connected with church women. Therefore, he said what he did. But remember, he spoke out of and to the conditions of his day. Is this binding on us today? No more than any other temporal customs that appear in Paul's writings. Do we greet our brother with a holy kiss? (Romans 16:16; I Corinthians 16:20; II Corinthians 13:12; I Thessalonians 5:26). Do we forsake water and take a little wine for the stomach's sake? (I Timothy

5:23). Do we require women to wear a veil over their face and let their hair grow long? (I Corinthians 11:3-16). All of these are commands of Paul on the same level as the word about silence, so why arbitrarily pick out one and ignore the rest? The truth is that these words belong to the historical strata of that period, and we are no more obliged to reproduce them than we are to wear sandals and live in houses like those of that day. If you want Paul's eternal word about women, look in Galatians: "There can be neither Jew nor Greek; there can be neither bond nor free; there can be no male or female; for ye are all one in Jesus Christ" (3:28). Here is the lasting truth; that in Christ woman is not discriminated against but assumes her rightful place in God's economy. The elevation of woman from the role of a servant is one of the great achievements of the Christian faith, and it is irony indeed that some in the name of Christ want to revert back to the very level from which Christ Himself has set us free! This is a false primitivism, to be sure, and a gross misunderstanding of what the Gospel is all about.

We must confess to the non-Christian, then, that this issue was both irrelevant and a mistaken understanding of Christianity. But let us quickly add that there is a Christianity that is relevant for this hour. To affirm "Jesus Christ, the same, yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8) is not to point to a static, motionless Figure, but One who speaks to the problems of 1961 as forcefully as He did to the first century. What He is and does is what our generation needs and wants. But He must be granted access to the problems of today. If so presented, who knows? That one who today stands on the outside, smiling at our pathetic performance, might then be numbered among His followers. But never if we keep "majoring on the minors." The contemporary Christ, introduced into contemporary life, can win contemporary man.

For His sake and for theirs, let us give Him a chance!