



# CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

## SERMONS

"THE FRONTIER WITHIN"

Sunday Morning, December 31, 1961  
Crescent Hill Baptist Church  
Louisville, Kentucky  
John R. Claypool

Scriptural Reference: Mark 4:1-12, 33-34

Several years ago I went to preach a revival in South Carolina. I had never been to this church, and the night before the meeting began I asked one of the members a very common question: "How big is your church?" Without hesitation she answered: "Oh, it is two stories." Of course, this was not what I had in mind, but I had to smile to myself, for she was technically correct. And this little exchange made me realize an obvious fact: that we are quite hazy in our usage of the word "church." It means different things to different people, and in our conversations we would do well to be more specific about what we mean. But the chain of thought goes even further; if there is haziness about the meaning of the word "church," how much greater is the confusion about her purpose? If we are not even sure about what she is, how can we possibly define what she is to do? Yet this is something that must be done. The formation of ultimate objectives is both exceedingly difficult and absolutely necessary. No individual or institution can possibly find fulfillment unless there is some well-defined and consciously-determined goal. There is an old poem I learned as a boy that goes like this:

"One ship sails east, and another west,  
By the self-same winds that blow  
'Tis the set of the sail, and not the gale,  
That tells the way to go."

The "set of the sail" is important, and answers must be found to the question of where one is going and why. This is certainly true of the church, and this time of year makes such a consideration natural. As we stand at this juncture between the old and the new, what are to be our objectives? As our church looks into 1962, what is "the set of our sail?" Toward what goals shall we move and what do we hope to accomplish? On this particular Sunday I invite your attention to an exploration of this basic region.

Someone may suggest that our goal at Crescent Hill for 1962 be the improvement of our building facilities. Now a look around us will indicate that there is much to be done in this area. A good portion of our new building is yet to be completed. We own property that ought to be made usable for parking. Our sanctuary is in definite need of redecoration. All of these are pressing necessities, and they are indeed important to the life of the church. Both our effectiveness and our influence are involved here. If we complete all these projects and put our instrument in its most usable form, we will certainly have greater possibilities for effective service. And we will also demonstrate to the community the importance we attach to our church. I came across a phrase

Sunday Morning, December 31, 1961

the other day in The Christian Century that was quite provocative; it was "the silent witness of a church building." The writer pointed out that seven days a week the edifice says something to the community about a particular congregation. And this set me to wondering what an outsider would deduct about us if all he observed was our building? As he looked at it and the way we keep it up, what would he decide was most important to us? Would he feel that this is a passionate concern of these people, or would it appear that this is a value of second-rate importance? I had never considered this matter before, but it adds a dimension of importance to our physical plant. Our building is significant, both for service and for witness, and it is my hope that in 1962 we can do all of these things that I have mentioned.

But having said that, I must admit that this can never be an ultimate goal. Important as it is, a building is still simply a means to a larger purpose. It is the possibility, the instrument, the occasion of the Real Thing, but not an end in itself. Quite often we forget this, and become engrossed in purely materialistic goals. Someone has said that since the close of World War II, the American Christianity has suffered from "an edifice complex." Too many people are like my friend in South Carolina; they identify the church as a building made of concrete and stone. This is a tragic confusion, for there is nothing eternal about walls and a certain type of architecture. If the spiritual reality ceases to exist, the building has no religious significance. Many is the church edifice that now houses a factory or a labor union or an office because the Real Thing is no more. Yes, we need to give attention to this area, but it cannot be our ultimate goal for 1962.

Someone else may suggest that increased attendance should be our main objective. Now it is quite obvious that this cannot be overlooked, for if people do not come the church certainly cannot have an effect upon them. And there are so many - right at this moment in the very shadow of our building - who have no interest in this or any other church. Why, there are at least six hundred of our own members who live in Louisville and never "darken the door." Certainly all these facts demand that we should put forth the effort to get them and many others to attend our program.

But here again, are we not dealing with a preliminary issue? Just as a building is merely the occasion for something more important, so is the fact of people coming to a certain place. It is what happens after they come that is really significant. Just as walking in a bank does not make one rich or walking into a school does not make one educated, so bodily presence on church premises does not make one religious. Here is another place where the modern church is often confused. We have allowed attendance figures to become our goal. As one punster put it: "Our favorite book in the Bible is not the book of Acts but the book of Numbers." This has been the easiest and most obvious criterion, but it cannot be the ultimate measure. As one studies the life of Christ, it is obvious that crowds were not foremost in His concern. He had compassion on the multitudes as they gathered before Him, but He did not stop with the fact that they were coming to hear Him in great droves. If His main purpose in going from village to village had been to see how big an audience He could attract, His career would have been a success but His ministry a failure. The great crowds were "a prelude of possibility," and not the end goal, and today we cannot be satisfied with merely trying by any means to lure bigger numbers into our program.

What then is our frontier for 1962? If we are not to strive exclusively for buildings or crowds, what is our basic aim? My answer is this: as always, the Christian frontier is within. To affect the real core of individual life, to transform the inner being, to redeem the essential self - this is our ultimate goal. Jesus summed up all of His striving in one phrase: "the Kingdom of God." Now what is this? This is not an institution or an organization; it is that realm where the will of God is obeyed. The essence of an earthly kingdom is that it is ruled by a king. So the kingdom of God is "the Rule of the Almighty," and wherever you find this, there is the Kingdom. Quite obviously this is a spiritual reality. Jesus spoke of the Kingdom of God as being "within you" (Luke 17:21); it is an issue of the heart, through and through. This is to be the obsession of the Christian; he is "to seek this first" (Matthew 6:33), above everything else. Jesus here is not asking more than He Himself was willing to do. The Rule of God was His foremost concern; He once said: "My meat is to do the will of Him that sent Me" (John 4:34). To obey and to see obeyed the will of God; this was His main objective. And we can take nothing less as the goal of our efforts. To bring every life and all of life under the sway of the heavenly Father is the job we have to do. No building program or attendance campaign has any religious meaning unless this is the conscious end-in-view. Jesus came to make God real and men into what they ought to be, and the church is the continuing instrument of that purpose.

But how did Jesus seek to achieve this goal? His main method, in addition to His example, was the use of the parables. Mark says that this was the only way He communicated to the multitudes. "But without a parable He spake not unto them" (Mark 4:34). Now perhaps you have never considered this usage as anything more than a clever teacher illustrating His truth for the unlettered masses. However, there is much more here; Christ's basic approach to His work can be seen in this aspect of His ministry.

The parable was much more than "a story with a point." It was a living weapon, aimed at attracting the hearer, but doing more than merely entertaining him. It had a very definite purpose - to get the hearer to do something. Its aim was active results: to arouse conscience and awaken insight; to bring the heart to some kind of commitment to the reality that was being communicated. Of course, this dynamic use of parables was not original with Jesus. The Old Testament prophets had utilized it to telling effect. One day the prophet Nathan walked into the court of King David and laid a case of justice before him. It concerned a rich man with large flocks and a poor man with but one possession - an ewe lamb that was regarded as a member of the family. When visitors came to the rich man, instead of sending for one of his many lambs, he took the one animal of the tenant, and served it for dinner. When asked his judgment, David was outraged, and pronounced the rich man guilty and laid down a sentence. Then Nathan's real purpose for the story appeared. He leveled a finger in the king's face and said: "David, thou art the man" (II Samuel 12:1-7). Like a Trojan horse that was granted admittance and then exploded with power, so Nathan's parable was a subtle but effective means of bringing judgment on David. And over and over again Jesus used stories to slip truth past the defenses of pride and then ignited the fuse to bring men "to themselves." He wanted both to communicate and to gain commitment, and this became His effective thrust into human lives.

It is important to note that men's response to these parables determined Jesus' reaction. He repeatedly warned, "Take heed how ye hear" (Mark 4:24) and "if a man hath ears to hear, let him hear" (Mark 4:23). When men expressed an interest in His truth and wanted more, Jesus concentrated on these. The parables were a kind of test, and by them the serious were separated from the superficial. It is unthinkable that Jesus would have used parables to confuse the multitudes or hide His truth. He set it forth in an arresting form, and those who were really sincere came to ask and to seek and to knock. T. W. Manson has suggested that Jesus' famous story about "the seed and the soils" (Mark 4:4-20) is really a description of His own use of parables. They were His "seed," and by reaction to them He determined which individuals were "good soil." Then He poured His effort into them. This is undoubtedly how the twelve were originally selected. His truth was sounded, and these individuals responded most intensely, and to them He gave Himself.

At this point our modern practices are quite different from the Master's. Our approach has been extensive rather than intensive. We have tried to see how wide could be our witness and how many people we could induce into some affiliation. We have been far more interested in spiritual childbirth than growth and development. And perhaps this accounts for the fact that our rolls are filled with inactive members and that we do well to have half our church present on a given Sunday. I think we need to rethink our whole philosophy, and study carefully the pattern our Lord established. He never begged any man to enter the Kingdom, neither did He resort to any artificial allurements. He took the most interested and built them into radiant centers of spiritual power. This was the strategy of solid penetration, and it worked. This is what we need to do. Before we can have more Christians we have got to have better Christians; before we can reach out we must dig down and grow up. Only those who are thoroughly grounded in the Kingdom and are captivated by its power can be effective agents of its spread. If Jesus were to take control of our church program for the coming year, I feel sure He would not expend all His energy on the fringes. He would start at the center and work out, like a fire burning its way through a blanket.

Therefore, our frontier for 1962 is within - within our own lives, and even within our own membership. To bring the lives of all and all of life under the rule of God - this is the Kingdom and this is our real goal. Important as buildings and attendance are, they are but the occasions for the Real Thing. To do and see done the will of God - this is our continuing frontier.

And the way to begin realizing it is to start at the center. We must activate our present membership. If we did not take in one new member but got all of our people involved, we could double the power of our church and develop them. To make the Gospel as attractive as possible and then take the most responsive - this is the path to the goal. There is no need to go looking for frontiers - the real one is right here (in the heart), and right here (in our church membership).

O Lord, whatever Thou would do through us in 1962, let it begin with me!