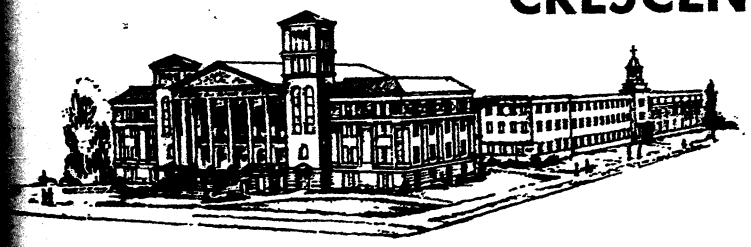

CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"QUO VADIS (WHERE GOEST THOU)?"

Sunday Evening, February 4, 1962
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
Mahan Siler, Jr.

Scriptural Reference: John 18:28 - 38a

Two accused criminals stood facing the death sentence - one in the first century; the other in the twentieth century. During the course of the trial they both testified concerning the overall meaning of their lives. Like a mountain climber who pauses at the peak of a mountain and glances back once more before going over the top, so these two men paused at death to glance back over the terrain of their lives. The twentieth century criminal's evaluation was this: "I cannot figure one good reason why I have lived!" The first century accused criminal, whom we know as Jesus, standing before Pilate saw his life altogether differently. His judgment was: "To this end was I born, for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth" (John 18:37b). The fundamental difference between these two statements and indeed between these two lives is the word "purpose." One had no good purpose for living - the other had an all encompassing purpose for both living and dying.

In this sermon I want to raise a question and then let Jesus suggest an answer. The question is not for debate but for personal reflection. It is not for armchair discussion but for self-confrontation. The question is this: "What is your purpose in life?" Or to use the words of the accused criminals: "What is your reason for living? To what end were you born, for what cause came you into the world?"

Now there are many of us that would have to admit: "I don't know why I'm living. I just am. I never thought much about where I was going or for what purpose I exist."

Many modern writers are saying that most people just exist, an existence best characterized by emptiness and purposelessness. For instance, Edna St. Vincent Millay has one character to say: "Life must go on. I forget just why." Again we find this emptiness in the question from one modern novel: "What will we do with ourselves this afternoon?", says Daisy. "And the day after that, and the next thirty years?" There are many who would have to admit, "Sir, I don't have a real reason for living."

We all have our routines. In the morning we get out of bed about the same time, eat breakfast, work, return home, eat again, perhaps watch television, go to bed, only to face the same kind of cycle tomorrow. Some routine is necessary, but when do we stop to ask: "Where am I heading? Why am I going through this particular routine?"

Yet most of us are not caught without some answers to this question of purpose. You have some idea of where you are going. You can pinpoint some reasons for

living. One inner voice says you are living to provide for your family and rear your children; another voice says one purpose is to be successful in your work; another says you want security more than anything else. As you face this question honestly, many puposes - even cross purposes - come to your attention. These are all good, but very likely no <u>one</u> of them is an adequate expression of a life purpose. The children will one day leave home; our work will leave us in retirement or we will leave it in death; real security never comes. So again we ask: "What is a <u>single</u> purpose that would gather up and encompass all that we do? What is the thread of purpose on which all our efforts and aspirations can be placed?"

This is a disturbing question because it forces us to confront our real self. Your answer to this question will largely determine who you are and what you will be. For instance, when a traveler tells me his immediate purpose is to travel to Shelbyville, this also indicates the route he will take. So if we can clarify where we want to go, this will reveal the route we will try to take. For instance, if in your honesty you find that a major purpose in your life is to possess the power of money and influence, then you will act in accordance with that aim. If your driving force in life is the hope for popularity, then you will be careful not to offend, even at the risk of compromise. If you have no clear purpose, then you can expect an aimless future. Thus, if you can clarify what your purposes in life are, you will come face to face with your real self. We then discover the motives and desires that really govern our lives.

Why wait until we face death to ask why we have lived? Let us ask it now. Business stops periodically to clarify objectives and purposes, but so should we as individuals. Thus one objective of this message is merely to raise a question and allow it to disturb us to some definite answers. The question again - what is your main reason for living?

The question of purpose must be answered by each of us. But let us next consider our Lord's answer to this same question. This question does not go unanswered from the lips of Jesus. He gave us a clear statement of purpose: "To this end was I born and for this cause came I into the world that I should bear witness to the truth" (John 18:37). He saw Himself as a <u>witness</u>. He came to point to and embody the love of God. He did not teach <u>about</u> the truth but <u>was</u> the truth. In a sense He bore witness to God's activity through His own life. At one point Jesus said to the Pharisees: "Though I bear witness to myself, yet my testimony is true: for I know whence I have come, and wither I am going" (John 8:14). The Book of Revelation knows Him as "the faithful witness." In short, His desire and purpose was to bear a faithful witness to the true will of the Father. All He did - even the cross - was but the outward expression of this single purpose.

Will you consider with me the possibility of accepting this as your purpose? Could it be that this is our all encompassing purpose - namely, to bear witness to the Truth as shown to us in Jesus Christ?

Unfortunately the word "witness" is an unpopular word. For some this word calls to mind many unpleasant pictures. It might remind us of a certain kind of evangelism where one would witness by cornering a stranger and asking him: "Brother, are you saved?" Some do not like this word "witness" because it seems to violate modesty, sincerity, and respect for the privacy of others. Yet just because Christian witnessing has often been distorted and insincere, this does not destroy the

relevance of the word itself. In fact, no other word better describes our purpose as Christians.

Let us strip the word of false associations and see this word "witness" within the context of the courtroom. In a world of "Perry Mason" and "The Defenders" we seem to be at home in the courtroom. In a trial the object is to discover the truth about a certain event. The primary way to accomplish this is through those who have witnessed the event -for example, witnesses to a car accident. In fact, if we have personal evidence of the truth we must share it. Witholding evidence is a criminal offense. As Christians we have been encountered by the truth in Jesus Christ. Many, however, have no such personal evidence and choose to come to different conclusions concerning the event of Christ. Because we have personal evidence and knowledge of His truth, we are called to the witness stand to testify. On this witness stand we are not called to argue; we do not speak for any other person; we do not reform another by superimposing our religion on him - but we do say as a faithful witness: "I know Christ to be the truth of my life because of such and such." This is the best we can do. Through word and deed we seek to bear witness or testify concerning this Truth.

With this concept of witness, notice with me the rightness of this word. It seems to best describe our thread of purpose. First, to say that we are to be witnesses saves us from <u>overestimating</u> our own importance. Some people do not want to be just witnesses to the truth; they want to be a part of the truth. They want to remake others into their image. They want a more important place than just pointing beyond themselves to Another. So this word saves us from such pride. We are not the masters, but point to the Master. We are not the answer, but point to the Answer. Actually we are but the wick from which the light shines. The important thing is the Light, the Truth, the Christ, and that we be faithful in reflecting Him and not ourselves.

Dr. George Buttrick tells of a recent experience while attending the Boston Symphony Orchestra concert. He watched carefully the man with the triangle who was required by the music to sound only one note. Minutes before that note he stood poised and ready to strike the triangle with his hammer. When the note was sounded, it was hardly noticed by the audience but certainly was noticed by the conductor. The musician could have brought attention to his own importance. He might have struck the triangle too forcefully; he could have "come in" too early or too late; he could have taken the bow at the end of the performance rather than the conductor. He did none of these because his purpose was to bear witness and draw attention to the music and to the conductor and not to himself. So it is with our witness. Our sounded note is not important by itself. Our purpose must not be to draw attention to our meager contribution, but to allow our lives to bear witness and draw attention to the Christian message and to the conductor, Jesus Christ. So the word "witness" places our lives in proper perspective. It saves us from overestimating our importance while at the same time underscoring His importance.

Secondly, to say that we are to be witnesses will save us from <u>underestimating</u> our importance. It saves us from thinking too highly of ourselves but also makes <u>everything</u> we do important.

To be a witness to Christ makes our home life important. It means our attitudes and actions there must testify to the reality of Christ.

To be a witness makes our daily labor important. How we work will reflect our Christian commitment. Here we do our work as unto the Lord. Thus, regardless of what it may be, it is an important expression of you.

To see ourselves primarily as a witness to Christ makes our personal relations important. Our ability to love and forgive is a convincing testimony to the truth of Christ.

This purpose also makes our conversation important - not just what we do not say, but what we do say. The hardest task for most of us is to verbalize our faith in Christ. Many would rather serve on any church committee than to talk about the reality of Christ in their life. Yet such modesty does not hinder us from expressing our opinions concerning sports, politics, and fashions. This is a large weakness today. We need to learn how to talk about Christ - not insincerely or dogmatically. We simply need to learn how to lead Christ into a given conversation <u>naturally</u> and normally.

Thus, if our stated reason for living is to point to Him, then <u>all</u> we do and say takes on tremendous importance. It gives purpose and significance to every facet of life.

What, then, is your reaction? Are you beginning to realize that our Lord's purpose could be yours? We could say we do not have a choice. It is a command and not an alternative. From the beginning Jesus stressed the importance of public witness. "Let your light so shine...Ye are the salt of the earth..." Even His last marching orders were, "Ye shall be my witnesses." Let us not respond just because it is commanded, but also because this is a single purpose that will give unity, direction, and meaning to all of life.

There is a legend concerning the last days of Peter, the apostle. He is running away from the persecution in Rome, when all of a sudden he confronts Christ on the road. Christ asks him: "Quo vadis? (Where are you going?)" Peter realizes that his present direction violates his chosen purpose of witness. So Peter reverses direction, returns to Rome, and is crucified for His sake. Christ stands across the pathway of your life and asks: "Quo Vadis (Where are you going?)"

Stop and struggle with that question. Allow it to challenge and redirect your lives to an adequate Christian purpose. Which of the two accused criminals best expresses your sentiments? Are you saying: "I cannot figure one good reason why I am living!" Or are you able to say with our Lord: "To this end was I born, for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth!"