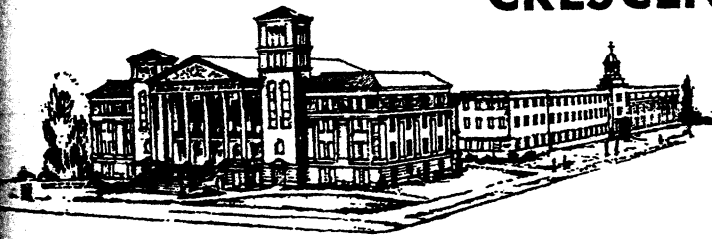


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS



"OUR STRUGGLE WITH COMMUNISM"

Sunday Morning, February 25, 1962
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
John R. Claypool

Scriptural Reference: Amos 5:14-24

Several years ago I sat on the porch of a beautiful plantation home in the heart of our Southland. The conversation turned to the subject of Communism, and my host did not hesitate to offer his interpretation. He said: "I see our present conflict as a clear-cut religious battle. They do not believe in God, and we do. They are atheistic, materialistic, and immoral. They violate every principle that we hold dear, and therefore they are bound to destroy themselves." He concluded by saying passionately: "I have absolutely no doubt about the outcome. I believe in God, and God will not be mocked. He's on our side and we are bound to win."

As I listened to these words I realized they were more than one individual's opinion. I had heard many others express the same position, and knew that this line of interpretation was representative of a vast host in the free world. As I turned the concept over in my mind, I could find no fault with the theoretical analysis. Our struggle is of a fundamental nature. This difference between East and West or between Communism and Christianity is at the deepest level. This is no mere sectional or racial or national clash. This is a difference of opinion about the nature of ultimate reality. And the answers each give are diametrically opposed. One side does deny God and affirm matter as the highest good, while the other side affirms Him and the primacy of the spiritual. This is an absolute conflict; with that analysis I could not argue. What did disturb me was his absolute confidence. My host seemed so sure of our position. The fact that we acknowledge the existence of God was all that mattered. This was the decisive lever in his opinion. And I asked myself: "Is this true to the nature of Biblical religion? Is mere belief in God the crucial issue? Does our present struggle with Communism resolve itself along such simple and absolute lines?"

Then I began to think through the history of the Biblical revelation, and I recalled the man who first challenged this idea. His name was Amos, and he lived in "the golden age of prophecy," eight centuries before Christ. His times were much akin to our own. There was a foreboding enemy to the east; the nation of Assyria had become quite powerful, and was stalking back and forth at her borders like a vicious jungle animal. Twice her armies had overrun Syria, and every indication pointed to an imminent attack on Israel. Yet in the face of this menace, Amos found the Israelites "at ease in Zion" (6:1); they seemed unconcerned, almost blasé about their danger. When he investigated, Amos discovered that their security was rooted in religious belief. Were not they "the chosen race" of Yahweh? Had He not called out their forefather, Abraham, and promised to bless his seed? Had He not delivered them from Egypt, given them "the promised land," and established the glory of David and Solomon? Surely the very existence of such a God was enough! The situation was as simple as this - Israel believed in Yahweh and Assyria did not; therefore, they had nothing to fear.

To this clear-cut interpretation, Amos registered a vigorous protest. In the name of Yahweh Himself he pronounced woe upon woe, and prophesied that sore calamity was at hand. Theirs was a false hope, an inauthentic security. What was wrong? It was not their concept of Yahweh's power, but their understanding of the relationship with Him. They conceived of it as a partial, abstract, intangible sort of thing. God was an Object of thought, not the Subject of devotion. They were related to Him by belief and ritual and ceremony, not by dynamic total commitment. Therefore Amos found existing side by side great religiosity and rampant evil. He hurled oracle after oracle at the chasm between religion and morality. They were affirming God with their lips but denying Him with their deeds. Their relation to God was unrelated to the vital core of life. It was sealed off, detached, unconnected, and Amos would have no part of it. He pronounced this inadequate religion, and his insight is a permanent contribution to spiritual understanding.

Now quite obviously the message of Amos bears directly on our contemporary situation. Mere belief is not the full measure of our religion. The fact that we acknowledge the existence of the Divine Being is not enough. In the great struggle with our avowed enemy, this is not an adequate basis of security. The question is not: do we believe God exists; it is rather: does He control us? The crucial issue is not at the level of intellectual opinion; it is rather at the level of life's ultimates.

Let me pause right here and reaffirm what I have said from the pulpit over and over again. The repetition would be embarrassing if this were not the essential character of our religion. The most important thing about us is what we are. Deeper than words or opinions or outward actions is that scale of values to which we have committed ourselves. Bishop James A. Pike has pointed out that this is the only area of real human freedom. Once a person has embraced certain priorities, his particular decisions evolve logically. For example, if a man resolves that his family is more important than personal pleasure, he is not "free" when the choice arises between attending P.T.A. or a ball game. The decision was actually made back up the line in the realm of the ultimates. In other words, we do on specific occasions what we are, and the latter is the strategic area. And right here is where the word "God" must be understood. Now I realize that in philosophical terms this word refers to a Divine Being. Here there is a valid distinction between "atheism" (there is no God) and "theism" (there is a God). But on the level of practical living, one's "God" is whatever he allows to be his ultimate. That highest priority that controls all subsequent action - this is the "God" that is really important. Here is where the nature of being is determined, and thus is the area of ultimate concern.

With this fact refreshed in our minds, we can now see clearly the real nature of our struggle with Communism. It is not an academic debate about atheism; it is a question of which ultimate we let control our lives.

The Communists affirm that material considerations are the basic value. Karl Marx interpreted history in this light. He says that economic factors are the explanation of all that has happened. The tension between the exploiters and the exploited, the owners and the workers - this is the whole story, a true reflection of Ultimate Reality. And so the Communist sets materialism at the center of his being.

However, we of the West affirm a different structure of Reality. Beyond the material are certain moral and spiritual principles. This is the true context of life; men act as they do because of certain ideals that are more basic than the realm of things. We affirm "a transcendent, vertical ethic." There are times a man will contradict his material interests in order to be consistent with these spiritual principles. This is our contention about the Ultimate, but is this really how we live? To me this is the disturbing crux of the problem: are we really spiritually controlled or are we actually as materialistic as the Communists? Truthfully now, what determines the national and individual life of "the Christian West?"

Our own Southland is perhaps the most "self-consciously" religious section of our country. Here, of all places, one would expect to see a demonstration of spiritual motivation. But in the crucial area of racial attitudes where material and personal values are in clear-cut juxtaposition - what is the real story? Let us look at two examples.

The first is my host who was so secure because of his "faith in God." What was his attitude toward the twenty Negro families who lived on his plantation? The spiritual tradition of his religion said that they were made in the image of God, precious beyond all other values, and were to be treated as ends and not means. To be consistent with this, he should love them, respect them, and treat them fairly. But instead of this, he referred to them contemptuously; he ordered them around gruffly and was superior and condescending in his attitude. He mentioned paying them fifteen dollars a week, of seeing to it that they always stayed in debt, of being opposed to their getting any education. He summed it all up by saying: "At all cost I'll see to it that they 'stay in their place'." What is the only possible conclusion? He identified himself with the spiritual tradition and felt secure in it, but in fact he was a materialist through and through.

The second example is on the community level. I recall being very close to the monumental battle over school integration in Atlanta. When I left in 1960, the lines were being drawn for an all-out struggle. I returned a year later to find the schools still open and integrated, and I inquired what had produced this decision. Was it moral and spiritual ideals? Was it the belief that human dignity is not a matter of race? When I asked, people said these ideas were in the background, but the main factor was fear of economic loss. More than one said: "The day the Chamber of Commerce came out and said: 'We cannot afford to close our schools,' right then the tide turned." Reluctant as I was to admit it, what looked like a moral victory was rooted in material concern.

These are only two examples, but they pose the question: are we of the West really committed to the primacy of the spiritual, or are we in fact materialists as well? If the latter be true, then the security of which my friend was so sure is nothing but an illusion. If we are participating in the way of life that we prophesy shall surely fail, where is our hope?

It is tragic indeed to consider yourself in one condition when actually you are in the opposite. There is a certain plant that grows in Australia that is quite deceptive. When eaten, it fully satisfies hunger but has no nutritional value. It is possible, by making this a steady diet, to be starving to death and not know it. Could this be a symbol of the free world? Are we satisfying our hunger with spiritual affirmation, and at the same time dying the death of materialism? It just

could be, and we are faced with the necessity for radical self-examination.

We are in a life-and-death struggle with Communism. The question is not: does God exist? It is rather: does God control us? Nothing else really matters. As Abraham Lincoln put it: "My concern is not whether God is on my side; it is rather: am I on God's side?" Who is our God? This is the question of our day. And we had all better consider it and consider it quick.

Why? Because it is later than you think!