



CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"KEEPING THE FAITH"

Sunday Morning, May 20, 1962
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
Dr. Harold Cooke Phillips

Scriptural References: II Timothy 4:7; I Timothy 6:20

We are to speak today about keeping the faith. Of course, we are all well aware that the faith ought to keep us, and does. Religion at its best is not a feeble, tottering thing that we must forever be coddling. On the contrary we are admonished to put on the whole armor of God, and an armor is not that which we defend—it defends us. Moreover, we have grown somewhat suspicious, and rightly so, of some of the self-appointed defenders of the faith. As a matter of fact it is a tribute to the vitality of our religion that it has endured in spite of, rather than because of, some of its well-intentioned defenders.

Nevertheless, there is something to be said for our keeping the faith. Paul, writing to Timothy, said, "I have kept the faith," and added, "O Timothy, keep that which is committed to thy trust." Such words indicate that he regarded the Christian faith as that which could be lost.

I venture to suggest then, in barest outline, four steps, which as I see them, are involved in keeping the faith.

The first is to make sure we possess it. One cannot lose what one has never had. It is a matter of common complaint, for example, that some students who go to college lose their religion. In college they are sometimes exposed to instructors who are unbelievers and seem to take fiendish delight in destroying the students' faith. Or it may be that in the general progress of their education they take courses in geology, anthropology, psychology, the Bible, and so on, which provide a new intellectual framework in which they may find it difficult to put their traditional religious beliefs. The new wine of knowledge cannot be contained in the old wineskins of their religious ideas. Consequently, they break and their religion leaks out. To adjust our traditional beliefs to the new knowledge that comes to us, in college or out of college is not always easy, often it is painful. It produces a religious crisis. Some do not weather it.

In fairness, however, I think one has to ask whether some of these students ever really possessed the faith to begin with, whether their religion may not have been words learned by rote rather than a vital experience in their lives.

And of course what is true of young people is true of all of us. But here again we may ask whether those who grew indifferent, who putting their hand to the plough look back, who beginning to build are not able to finish, in whom like the shallow soil the seed quickly sprouts and as quickly withers—whether they really ever possessed the Christian faith.

For we may be sure that if one has ever really experienced the reality of God in his own life, if he has ever been captured by the spirit of Christ; if he has caught a vision of the eternal purpose which God has purposed in Christ for man's

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redemption, he will not lose it. He may fall but he will get up. He may grow weary but he will not give up.

To keep the faith then we must first try to make sure we have it. For, there is a difference between faith in general and the faith of which Paul speaks. One can have faith without having the Christian faith. Actually nobody could live for a day, for an hour, without faith of some kind. But the faith, the Christian faith, is something else. Not everybody has this faith, hence not everybody can lose it.

Now, assuming that we have this faith, another step in keeping it is in frankly realizing that it is not easily kept. The Christian faith is not obvious. It is not that which one would think up all by himself. As Paul puts it, "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned." The Christian faith often goes contrary to our prevailing bent or interest. Sometimes its profoundest truths are couched in paradoxical language which seems contrary to common sense. "He that loseth his life. . . shall find it." True as true can be, but not obvious. Similarly, "If any one would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." "Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth." "Ye are all one in Christ Jesus." "Now ye who are strong ought to bear the burdens of the weak, and not to please ourselves." Every one of these statements contains eternal truth, saving lifegiving truth—but they are not obvious.

Indeed, to look at a Babe lying in a manger and say "Immanuel—God with us," or a man dying on a cross as a criminal, and say, "Yes, but God is there—God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself," that is far from obvious. The faith is difficult. It is "reason grown courageous."

Moreover, the hardships of life make it difficult to hold our faith. It is not easy to view the cruel, unexplainable tragedies that often strike the finest people, and hold faith in a loving God; or to see the frequent victories of evil, to see as we often do, right on the scaffold and wrong on the throne, and believe in the justice of God. It is not easy to believe that in and through all the chaos, cruelty, the wickedness of the world God is working out His eternal purpose purposed in Christ. "We see through a glass, darkly," said Paul.

The Christian faith then is not something we just easily slide into. We climb up to it, and the position we gain must be held against strong continuous opposition. It is not for naught that Paul's favorite symbols for the Christian are the soldier and the athlete. Both symbols suggest conflict, discipline, opposition. It is significant that before he wrote, "I have kept the faith," he wrote, "I have fought a good fight."

One has the feeling that some of us lose the faith because we fail to understand this. We think that once having joined the church we could just pull in the oars and drift. But, after all, nothing in this world that is worth having and keeping—a beautiful flower garden, a college diploma, a happy home, a Christian character—is ever achieved that way. Eternal vigilance is the price not only of salvation but of anything worth having.

Again, how one keeps anything depends on the nature of what one keeps. For example, we keep some things by pickling, preserving them; but other things we keep just the opposite way. If, for example, we pick a fruit from a tree and want to keep it, we can it, put it in an airtight container. At the heart of the fruit,

however, are some seeds, and the very process by which we preserve the fruit would destroy the seeds. The reason is that the fruit severed from the tree is lifeless, while the seeds contain the germ of life. If you bury the fruit it will rot. If you bury the seeds they will grow!

Now I believe faith is more like the seed than the fruit. It is a living reality. We keep our valuables by putting them in a strong box in a bank. Only dead things can be kept that way, not living things.

This all seems obvious enough, yet it seems to me that the church in general and individuals in particular often forget it. And we forget it because we often fail to see the difference between the faith and the particular intellectual framework, creed or dogma our fathers used to express their faith. Sometimes we have to discard the form, the framework, if we are to keep the faith.

Take for example the Book of Job. Job's so-called comforters held to the dogma that all suffering was due to sin. It is true that sin invariably brings suffering, but the reverse is not true. We cannot say that all suffering is due to sin. But Job's "comforters" held to this dogma. Job, a good man, a righteous man had suffered greatly, therefore they insisted that he had greatly sinned. That just was not true. Job's experience told him it was not true. Had he held on to that dogma he would have lost his faith. He discarded the dogma and so kept his faith in a God who though too big for his finite mind to understand, he yet by faith believed understood him. He could say, "Though he slay me, yet will I trust in Him." Sometimes like Job, like our Master, we have to doubt or discard some traditional belief in order to discover new spiritual depths.

Take another example. When Martin Luther was engaged in his eventful struggle with the Roman church, he wrote a book entitled "The Babylonian Captivity of the Church." It was a scathing attack on the whole sacramental system of the Roman church. So significant was this attack that King Henry the Eighth wrote a reply to the courageous monk, and for his effort, the church conferred on this king, who I venture was hardly a model of saintliness, the title "Defender of the Faith." But as we now clearly see, King Henry was not defending the faith. He was defending certain time-honored tenets or practices which had become veritable vaults, tombs, in which the living faith was buried. The man who was really defending the faith in the sixteenth century was not the worldly king nor the powerful church, but Martin Luther, who sought to rescue the living faith from the inadequate beliefs and corrupt practices with which it was identified--Luther, who like Abraham of old, by faith went forth, not knowing whither he went. Faith is not only anchors that hold but sails spread to catch the breezes of God. To keep the faith which is a living reality we must at times distinguish between the treasure and the earthen vessel.

If I may be allowed a personal reference, let me say that I was looking not long since at a picture taken of our family group some fifty years ago. It reminded me of the words of Sir James Barrie, "God gave us memory that we might have roses in December." But really that family group looks quite queer, almost funny. The styles have changed in fifty years! I believe they change oftener than that. I am sure the female members of that group would not be seen in the dark today clad as they then were.

But as I looked at that little group and got beneath the outward appearance, it seemed to me that there was something abiding there in spite of the changes. Love was in our hearts then, the love that holds the family together. It is still there. Ties of understanding, fellowship and loyalty were there then. Those ties have not been broken. Gratitude for the privilege of a Christian home and Godly parents was there. That gratitude remains. Could that picture be taken again today you would never think it was the same group. To all outward appearances every detail would be different. Yet in essential matters, the living realities would be the same.

Now I think we will agree that even today there is a tendency to make the Christian faith dependent on, if not indeed to identify it with, certain ecclesiastical practices or forms through which it has come to us. For some it is the mode of baptism, for others worshipping on Saturday rather than Sunday, for others some theory of apostolic succession, for others a particular type of church government, and so on. One is not saying that these and similar practices are of no consequence. One is saying that they simply are not an adequate measure of the living, dynamic Christian faith, and that to insist that they are may be a great hindrance to the larger life of the spirit. "The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life." It has been said in a generalization, and generalizations are never wholly true, that "dogma is the living faith of the dead, and the dead faith of the living." Or as another puts it, "Take from the altars of the past, the fire, not the ashes."

There is a dynamic, pioneering, adventurous quality in faith. This is what we often fail to see. The Master said He would send the spirit of truth who would lead us into all truth and show us things to come. Often we do not want to be led. We resist the promptings of the spirit and as the Master said make the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition.

To mention but one matter, can there be much doubt that God is seeking to lead His church today into a richer experience of unity? Some of you may not agree with what I shall now say. But it is true whatever one may think. I am convinced that the primary need today is not that we be known as Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians or whatnot. The primary need is to be known as Christians. "Ye are all one in Christ Jesus." It is sinful to make denominational labels barriers to Christian fellowship. Long ago our Lord prayed that they might all be one that the world might know. But our denominational pride and exclusiveness mean more to us than the Kingdom of God. We love to sing "Like a mighty army moves the church of God." How one wishes that it did! It does not because some of us do not want the church to move like a mighty army. We want it to function like a bunch of unrelated squads, each fighting a guerrilla war against our common enemy.

See then that faith is not only anchors that hold. It is that, but not only that. It is also sails spread to catch the winds of God. Sometimes we have to pull up the anchors, before we can move into the ampler areas of God's will for us. "In God we live and move." As someone has observed, "If we do not move, we do not live, we die." God help us to see the truth of that before it is too late.

It is always necessary therefore, to distinguish between the form and the faith—the scaffolding and the building, the frame and the picture, the earthen vessel and the treasure. That is essential if we would keep the faith.

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If it be true that faith is a living reality, it follows that there is a fourth step, namely, keeping faith in touch with life. It is sometimes said of people that they have outgrown their religion, as though religion were comparable to a pair of shoes, a suit of clothes, or the toys in our nursery. Such things we do outgrow, for we go on but they stand still; we have life and they have not. But if we rightly conceive of faith as a living reality we cannot outgrow it, for it will grow along with us as we keep it in touch with the living issues in which we are involved.

It is, I think, Henry Ward Beecher who relates that once out for a walk with his dog, the dog on seeing a woodchuck dart through a hole in a fence, rushed up to the hole and barked. Some days after, however, on traversing the path again, the dog repeated the performance, barked excitedly at the hole in the fence through which the woodchuck had fled. The dog did not realize that he was dealing with a dead issue. Dogs are not alone in this! Had he been a wise dog he would have tried to find out where the woodchuck now was, rather than becoming so agitated over where it once had been.

O my friends, how often has the church been guilty of that--barking at empty holes, making a lot of noise over dead issues, fighting verbal battles which seem to make so little difference to the vital, pressing issues that stir men's souls. I am reminded of a question once put to a parishioner. "How is the new minister getting along?" he was asked. To which the reply came, "Our new minister can answer more questions that nobody is asking than any minister we ever had."

But faith cannot be kept that way. Jesus said, "I am the way." He did not say, "I am a hitching post." He did not say, "Copy me," but "Follow me--I am the way." The way suggests motion. We must not keep Christ in chains. We must allow Him to move into all the areas of life. The leaven must be kept in the lump. Faith must be kept in touch with life, with vital living issues. I am confident the living issues are not what some of us think they are.

Here then are four steps, and have you thought of how clearly marked they are in Paul's life? He really possessed the Christian faith. It was not words on his lips but an experience in his life. "I know whom I have believed." He kept it, but not without struggle. It was not easy for him to keep it. The thorn in the flesh, the evil tendencies of his own heart, "the body of this death," to say nothing of the active opposition of a hostile world, made it hard to him to keep the faith. Moreover, faith to him was a living reality, so alive, so dynamic, that it made him one of the most creative personalities of all time. And as to keeping it in touch with living issues, that is why he was imprisoned, beaten, stoned and finally beheaded.

Now these four steps in Paul's life could be put in one sentence: Paul kept the faith because Christ was to him a living reality. Not the Christ made in our image, but the bold adventurous pioneer of faith. When all is said and done, that is what keeping the faith means. It means coming to know this Christ, not simply as an historic figure from whom dim tracks of time divide us, but as a living reality, a living spirit in our hearts. Moreover, not a static Christ, but one who is marching on, going before us, and calls us to follow Him.

A group of men looking at a tree were once trying to discover the source of its continuing life. One said its life is in the leaves, another said, in the bark, another in the trunk, still another in the roots. Then came along a botanist, who said, "There is of course truth in your observations, but actually the continuing life of the tree lies in none of these things; it lies in the layer of living cells that lie between the bark and the wood. Cut a ring around the tree, sever that living layer, and in spite of leaves, bark, trunk and roots the tree will die."

So we may say men were discussing the secret of Christianity's survival, continuance. One said it lies in an authoritarian church. Another, in an infallible book. Another, in our sectarianism in the meticulous performance of certain rites or ceremonies. And then I can imagine the apostle coming along. "Paul, how do you keep the faith?" Perchance he would answer, "I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me."

When we thus try to keep the faith by living in fellowship with Christ, who ever goes before us, keeping the connection between our spirits and His unbroken, unsevered, then a strange result ensues. We find that it is not we who are keeping the faith at all, but as Paul also puts it, that we "are kept by the power of God through faith. . ." So Charles Kingsley said, "I don't want to possess a faith. I want a faith that possesses me." Quite so. The faith we try to keep keeps us.

As we get older we realize that it is not what we hold, for our grip is weak, but what holds us, that is the source of our strength.

"I steadier step when I recall
That if I slip Thou dost not fall."

PRAYER

Eternal God and Father of our spirits, we thank Thee not only for our hold on Thee but for Thy hold on us, for the love that wilt not let us go. Make us steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, that we may pass on to those who follow us the priceless heritage of the Christian faith entrusted to us. In Jesus' name. Amen.