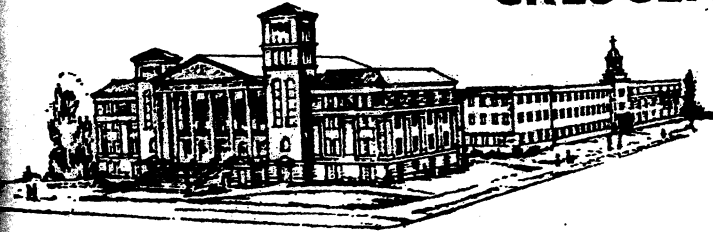


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"THE COURT, PRAYER, AND THE CHURCH"



Sunday Morning, July 1, 1962
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
John R. Claypool

Scriptural Reference: Matthew 6:5-8

Several years ago I heard a prominent minister make this statement: "You cannot serve God on an absolute schedule." I was a theological student at the time, and was greatly surprised to hear what he said. However, now that I have served in the pastorate for several years, I understand exactly what he meant. For all along, unexpected situations arise, and right then the matter of timing becomes all important. I would go so far as to say that much of the meaning of what I do is determined by when it is done. This certainly holds true in the pastoral realm. For example, when a person dies, there are several things I try to do and say to the family. But for these acts to have their true significance, they must be done at a certain moment. If I waited for a month to contact the bereaved, even if I went through the exact same ritual, it could not mean then what it would on the day of the event. Ministers must face the fact that rigid schedules are impossible, for timing is a crucial factor in effective pastoral care. And the same principle applies to preaching as well. I try to map out generally the areas I want to treat, but then all of a sudden something will happen that changes the whole situation. An opportunity will present itself that may not return again. If I "stay on schedule" and wait two or three Sundays, the golden moment will be passed, and what is said will not carry the same impact. Here again, the minister needs a kind of sensitive flexibility that at times will cause him to shift directions and thus capitalize on the moment.

I have said all this to explain what I am doing this morning. Last Monday, when the bulletin was being prepared, I planned to preach on a certain subject. But then that very afternoon the Supreme Court handed down a ruling that has set off widespread and vigorous discussion. I cannot remember when a religious issue has attracted such interest. Therefore, because it is "in the air" and also because it involves such significant implications for all of us, I am taking the liberty to depart from the announced subject and deal directly with this cardinal religious issue. In order that I may be as candid and to the point as possible, I would like to trace for you my own pilgrimage through the week, and then share three observations that I feel are pertinent for our understanding.

I first learned of the Court's action by glancing at the headline of a newspaper. I was out making hospital calls, and all I saw was the sentence: "Supreme Court Rules Unconstitutional Prayer in Public Schools." My initial reaction was one of shock and dismay. As I drove along by myself, all kinds of foreboding thoughts played through my mind. I thought: "This is another sign of the secularization of our country. Step by step we are drifting away from our spiritual heritage and are becoming thoroughly pagan." I began to contemplate the effect this would have on our school children: "If all prayer and mention of God's name is forbidden, this implies that such things are irrelevant and unimportant. It creates a world-view with no spiritual dimension and by its very vacuum establishes secularism as the

best religion." Then, too, my mind skipped to the influence this action would have on other countries. If we were outlawing the act of prayer, how different would we appear in the eyes of the world from the Communist states that are avowedly atheistic? As all of these impressions bore down upon me, I felt a certain sense of guilt for having so strongly advocated the separation of church and state. "If this is the logical end," I thought, "where religion is separated from life and the state turns against the church, what monster have we created in the name of religious liberty?" In summary fashion, these were my first reactions, and I sensed we were faced with a grave crisis in our country. By virtue of its gravity I knew I could not flippantly dismiss the matter. That first night I made three resolves: first, I must gather all the facts and get to the bottom of this thing; second, I must discuss it with other folk who were ultimately concerned; and third, I must give it the prayer and thought that would lead to some clarification and a course of action.

For the rest of the week I tried diligently to move toward those goals. A good lawyer in our church provided me with the full text of the decision, which I studied carefully. I was privileged to talk to many people whose insight I respect. I spent quite a while "in my own solitariness" trying to weigh the issues. Out of all of this, one thing became clear: my first reactions were at variance with the facts. I thought the Court did one thing when actually it had done something else. You see, when I read the decision, I found that the act of praying was not the issue at all; it was the origin and enforcement of a particular prayer. An arm of the government - the State Board of Regents of New York - formulated the twenty-two word supplication and required its use in all the schools. It was this action of the government - defining and demanding a certain prayer - that aroused the Court. For me the whole matter came in focus when I realized that the Court did not rule out all prayer in the public schools. What it did rule out was the government's right to tell us what to pray and that we must pray.

When the precise nature of the action became clear, I must confess that I was in full accord with it. If you know any of the history which led to the founding of this country, you will realize that it was this very type of governmental intervention that was involved. In 1549 the English Parliament authorized the Book of Common Prayers that prescribed how men could pray. There was also an Act of Uniformity in the same year that made a certain order of worship obligatory. It was in dissent to this that our early Baptist forefathers were welded together in a group. John Bunyan spent most of his life in jail for violating this act. It was this imperial attitude that sent the Pilgrim Fathers first to Holland and then to this country. Here they found religious freedom, and over a century later, when framers of the Constitution were trying to safeguard this precious privilege, they adopted the First Amendment to keep the government out of this area. Here is the famous "wall of separation" between church and state. And it was in compliance with this principle that the Court acted as it did last Monday. The decision makes clear that the Justices are not against God or the power or validity of prayer. What they are against is the government creating and controlling this form of religious life.

If you will ponder this matter, I think this action will commend itself. Do you want the government determining the prayers you and your children pray? It is true that the New York Regent's prayer is broad and harmless. But what if another group got control of the government? We might be forced to say prayers that totally isolate our conscience.

Here in this pulpit I have positioned myself long ago in favor of "a free church in a free state." I believe that the Church is at her best when she is neither supported nor controlled by the government. Because of this continuing conviction, I did a full circle in my sentiment this week, and was encouraged rather than depressed by what happened. Three of the best legal minds in our church said to me that the advocates of religious freedom should take heart at this action of the Court. In prohibiting government encroachment into the area of determining and enforcing prayer, one of the distinctives of our national heritage was not denied but preserved.

I profoundly regret that the matter has been so widely misunderstood, for I do think harm has come of that. If our country has appeared to deny the existence of God or to say that it is unlawful to pray at all times, this will weaken our influence in the world. But I firmly believe this sort of consequence stems from a distortion and not a true understanding of what actually took place. Let me repeat: the decision did not ban all prayer in the public schools, but only the specific prayer that was written and enforced by the state.

I hope this has clarified the issue for our thinking, and has enabled us to see the situation as it is. Having tried to do that, let me make three observations about the whole matter.

First, I have been reminded in all of this about the importance of basing opinions on facts. Quite frankly, I grabbed an idea on the run the other day and dashed off in all kinds of wrong directions. I let a headline be my only guide and substituted emotion for reason. I am standing here publicly to confess that I jumped to a lot of conclusions before I really knew all that I should. I built a superstructure before I laid a sure foundation. This is bad, no matter what area you are in, and I fear is at the root of a lot of our problems. If we could school ourselves in "sitting down before truth like a little child," and proportioning our conclusions to fact and not to feeling, this would do as much to improve our world as anything I know. There is a verse in the Gospel of John that has always intrigued me. Jesus said: "Everyone who is of the truth hear My voice" (18:37). To be "of the truth" seems to be the condition of knowing His will, and this week I was reminded of just how basic this is to life.

The second observation has to do with some of the forms that reaction to this decision have assumed. Did you read in the paper that the man who filed the suit in New York has been threatened, abused, and intimidated in the most violent way? Think about that for a minute! The very people who are supposed to be for God and advocating prayer resort to calling a man and threatening to kill him. This incredible duplicity simply underscores the fact that there is a difference between the outward forms of religion and its true spirit. A person can passionately embrace all the intellectual tenets and still contradict the very essence of the Faith. We learned during the Inquisition that men can do ungodly things in the name of God. Never forget that religious people engineered the crucifixion of our Lord. At the same time that they were plotting their malicious course, they were faithful to the rituals of the Law. The way some have reacted to this issue should remind us that we cannot advance the Christian cause by unchristian means.

My third observation is this: we are not dealing here with the best form of prayer or the most effective means of advancing the Kingdom. Of course, no one can

measure these school exercises down to a spiritual centimeter, but I think all would agree saying a rote prayer in a perfunctory way is hardly the highest form of "the soul's sincere desire." True, this may be the only prayer some children witness, but just how effective is it? I dare say that to a child in whose home there is no prayer or no encouragement to go to church, these routine rituals have little meaning. This is certainly a far cry from the highly personal discipline that was taught by Jesus whereby a man was to go into his closet and communicate directly with God (Matthew 6:6). Neither is the subject under discussion a real means of making Christian disciples. How many children do you think are converted and led into a vibrant Christian life just by these stated prayers? They certainly have symbolic and supportive power, but they are not enough by themselves. What I am saying is that the Church must face her awesome and lonely responsibility in this area. I do not deem it arrogant to say that the instrument God has chosen to redeem society is not the public school but the church. I fear far too long we have relied on these vague, indirect endeavors. Listen - America is not a Christian nation simply because we stamp "In God We Trust" on our coins! It takes more than these general symbols, and we need to face this. The task of Christianizing men is upon the Church whether a prayer is said in the schools or not. We cannot shift the responsibility or hope the job is being done by these outward gestures. We need to recapture the truth of the vision in Revelation. There John heard a voice and saw one "like a son of man" walking "in the midst of the seven golden lampstands" (Revelation 1:13). This is a symbolic way of saying that Christ is among His churches; if you want to find Him, this is where He is: in His body which is the Church. The task of redemption is ours, and we must respond to it.

I have said all this in the hope that it would clarify our present crisis. The Word of God is relevant and meaningful and applicable to this present hour. I pray this morning that about this subject and through this service He has spoken to you!