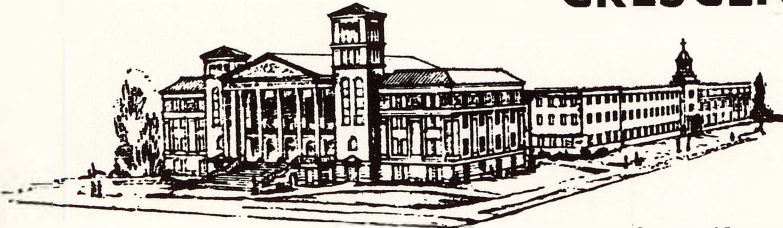


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS

"THE SHARING COMMUNITY"



Sunday Morning, November 4, 1962
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
John R. Claypool

Scriptural Reference: Acts 4:32 - 5:11

Quite often I hear it said: "The church is not what it used to be. It has 'gone modern'; has adopted a lot of 'new fangled' programs. As it stands today, it is a far cry from what it was in 'the good old days.'" I always hasten to agree with such a statement, for I think it is factually correct. The church is not what it once was. However, whether this assertion is good or bad depends entirely on which point in history one is using for comparison. There are some chapters in the church's past that cause me to blush with shame, and in relation to them I am glad that this statement is true. On the other hand, if one has reference to the Book of Acts and what the church was in the beginning, then the assertion causes real pain. Yet in all honesty, who of us would dare deny its truth? For all our talk about being "New Testament churches" and "going back to the Bible," the fact is that a great chasm exists between what they were and what we are.

This realization came to me quite vividly this week when I read again the first part of the Book of Acts. I was deeply moved by this unadorned account. Never have so few accomplished so much! Here was a bedraggled band of "insignificant nobodies" who in one generation "turned the world upside down." I was inspired but also disturbed, for all this seemed so foreign to the church I know today. When I consider our size and relative power and then realize how little we are actually doing, I wonder if the same title should be applied to us. With real anguish I must admit: compared to those first days, the church today is not what it used to be.

A good illustration of this judgment is the area of material stewardship. Right now this is a dominant concern in our church, so it should be of great interest to look at the practice of this early group. How did they do in their financial campaigns? Here is what we read: the company of believers were one in heart and soul, so they held all things in common. No man looked on his possessions as exclusively his own, but made them accessible to the needs of the group. Many sold their property and shared with the fellowship so that there was not one needy person among them (Acts 4:32-35).

Now certainly no one would argue the point that this condition is different from what we experience today. We talk about a tenth while they dealt in totality. We ask people to think in terms of giving something and they witnessed people giving everything. Here is so radical a phenomenon that we find it preposterous. We can hardly even conceive of such a thing. You are probably asking: "What on earth were those early Christians like? Were they some kind of spiritual freaks? Did they have angelic capacities? Were they a different order of being than people today?" These are practical questions that inevitably arise, and we must honestly face them. Is the difference between then and now so great that we cannot even expect to be like them?

In answering this question, I want to refute this whole implication. The early Christians were not that different. They had no angelic powers or divine temperaments. On the contrary, I would say they were exactly like you and me. Here is what

they did: they spent their money for what they thought was most important. Is this so unusual? Of course not. It is what you do; it is what I do; it is what men in every age have done. This principle of spending according to a scale of values has been in operation since the beginning of time.

That this accounts for what was happening in the early church is illustrated by the two examples that are mentioned in this same passage (Acts 4:36 - 5:11). One is Barnabus, who later emerges as one of the giants of the New Testament. He was from Cyprus, and must have owned a good deal of property, for we are told that he sold a field and gave all of the proceeds to the church. Why did he do this? Because the welfare of that little group and the One to whom they belonged had become his foremost concern. He gave because the church was his highest value. Here was a fellowship that transcended his individual concerns. Just as no true father would sit down to the table and keep all the food to himself while the rest of the family starved, so to Barnabus it was inconceivable that he should maintain a surplus while some of his brethren lacked. He shared precisely as he cared. This same principle is operative in the second example, that of Ananias and Sapphira. They, like Barnabus, sold some property, but acted quite differently. They held back part of the price for themselves and gave the rest as if it were the total proceeds. They met a swift and dramatic judgment, as both died within hours of each other. Their sin was not in the fact that they did not give everything. It is abundantly clear that there was no compulsory communion in the early church or legislation that abolished private ownership. They were free to do as they would. Their sin was their hypocrisy, their attempt to appear differently than they were. They brought darkness into the fellowship of light, and seemed to suffocate in such an atmosphere. The point I want to emphasize, however, is that both men acted on the same principle: they spent according to value. To Barnabus, the highest priority was the church, and so he gave freely. To Ananias, it was his own security and reputation, so he kept and gave as he did. Thus I repeat, the early church was not a collection of "other world" beings; it was made up of folk exactly like us. If we encounter here a radical difference, it cannot be traced to the level of capacity; it is to be found in the area of the values to which each is committed. Without trying to oversimplify, I would say that the difference between them and us boils down to this: the church meant more and so they gave more.

Here is another instance of the deep relation between the material and the spiritual realms. We make a verbal distinction here, but in fact they are organically one. This extraordinary material action of the early church simply reflects their spiritual condition. As always, what they did was rooted in what they were. The material is forever the outward sign of an inward state. Jesus stated this principle perfectly in a verse whose truth is interchangeable. He said: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (Matthew 6:21). However, you could reverse the parts and the statement would be just as valid: "Where your heart is, there will your treasure be also." For basic to our existence is the interrelation of being and action. What we do is rooted in what we are, and what we are is determined by what we value. As I have said to you before, this latter area is the place of our only real freedom. Every man has the privilege of choosing his ultimate values. We can look at life and decide what is really important. However, after we have settled on this, consciously or unconsciously, then an inexorable process takes control. Our subsequent decisions are determined by this Great Decision, and what we do on a particular occasion is influenced by what we decided back at the crossroads. For example, the actions of Barnabus and Ananias were "predestined" in a sense. Not by God or an overwhelming Fate, but by the values each embraced within his heart. Here

is the crucial area of human existence, and the area that explains the difference in the church then and the church now.

This morning I want to make this point clear, so that we can understand what we are doing in its proper context. As we call for decision in the realm of stewardship, this is not a peripheral affair. Here is the acid test of spirituality. What the early Christians did with their money laid bare what they were in their souls. And this morning your action has exactly the same character.

I received a circular the other day offering to analyze my personality and predict my future simply on the basis of my handwriting. These experts claimed that one reveals far more than he may realize by the way he handles his pen. I have real doubt about such an enterprise, but I do know of another process of spiritual self-revelation. By what you write on a pledge card this morning, you will unveil a real part of yourself. By this shall God and all men know what you think is really important. By what you do with what you have, you make known what you are.

This is a moment of truth in many ways this morning. What our church can do, what our missionaries can do, what our denomination can do - all these are in the balance. But even more significantly is the test of your soul - right now you can get a clear glimpse of where you are spiritually.

Yes, the statement is true: "The church is not what it used to be." In the beginning they had all things in common. This was not because they had extraordinary powers. No, like everyone, they spent according to their values. They were different because of their commitment. They were in literal fact what we speak of loosely today. How do we express our relation to a church? We use the word "belong." We ask: "Do you belong to this church or that?" It is a good word and perfectly appropriate, but do you realize what it means? To belong is to be under another's control. If something "belongs" to me I have authority over it. Therefore, it is something radical to say: "I belong to Crescent Hill Baptist Church." This is exactly how the early Christian must have felt, and thus why they acted as they did. Perhaps we should quit asking: "To which church do you belong?" and get to the real point. "Do you belong to the church at all?"

This is the crux of the matter. This is why the early church was what it was. This determines what we shall be. Well, do you belong? Please write your answer on the pledge card.