

The Eternal Purpose

BROADCAST September 2

SCRIPTURE—Ephesians 3:8-11

TEXT—“. . . the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord”—Ephesians 3:11.

It was examination time in school. A young man emerged from a class room remarking to a friend, "I feel just like Julius Caesar." When asked what he meant, he said, "I have just gone down in history." Of course, what he meant was that he had failed to pass his history examination. Quite obviously most of us know how he felt.

But in a broader sense have not all of us failed to learn the lessons of history? Nations, groups, and individuals go blundering along with little regard to the things which we might learn from the past. We make the same mistakes with the same unhappy results. And so history seems to us as a vicious cycle. It does not seem to make sense.

However, the trouble is not with history but with us. We tend to gauge history by isolated events rather than by its unifying purpose. As one has said, we do not learn what the centuries have to say against the hours. Thus we march out of step with the purpose of the ages.

Is there a unifying purpose in history? Or is history like Oliver Wendell Holmes' "wonderful one-hoss shay" which "ran a hundred years to a day," and then

"went to pieces all at once,—

All at once, and nothing first,
Just as bubbles do when they
burst"?

Yes, there is a unifying purpose in

history. You do not find it in the headlines of the daily paper. Nor is it necessarily evident in the historical records of any given generation. It is found in the Bible. Yes, in the Bible. God's Book makes reference to it in Ephesians 3:11 when it says, ". . . according to the eternal purpose which he [God] purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord."

As we consider "The Eternal Purpose" let us note, first, the principle; second, the Person; third, the personnel.

First, consider the principle. Paul speaks of "the eternal purpose." Thus he says that there is a unifying principle underlying history.

What is this principle? War? Philosophy? Economics? Government? Each of these has its champions. But none of these was in the mind of the apostle. He is speaking of a spiritual purpose which is the guiding force in history. The word "purpose" means that which is placed before. Before time began, therefore, there was in the mind and heart of God that which was placed before history itself. Now what is this purpose?

If you will read Ephesians up to Chapter 3, verse 11, you will see that Paul is speaking of God's purpose to redeem all men, both Jew and Gentile. So we may say that this unifying principle in history is God's redemptive will and purpose. Even a casual reading of the Bible from Genesis

through Revelation will reveal this to be true. The Bible interprets all of history in this light, whether it be the history of Israel or of her pagan neighbors. A similar reading of history—ancient, medieval, and modern—will enable you to comprehend the unity of the historical process.

Someone has said that all of history is His-story. This is what Paul is saying in his philosophy of history as related on Mars Hill in Athens. God *"hath made of one ["blood" not in the best manuscripts] all nations of men for to dwell on all the face of the earth, and hath determined the times before appointed, and the bounds of their habitation; that they should seek the Lord . . ."* (Acts 17:26-27).

Here then is the unifying principle for all nations—"that they should seek the Lord." No nation ever emerged from the womb of time as a surprise to God. He determines the time of their rising and the boundaries of their territory. So long as they fit into God's purpose they prosper. When they refuse to do so they reach their zenith, and then decline or pass away.

This principle is clearly demonstrated in the case of ancient Israel. It is just as evident in an analysis of Rome, Greece, Persia, Babylon, Assyria, and Egypt. Modern nations would do well to learn this lesson, or else like the student, they too will go down in history.

Second, note the Person. ". . . the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord." Thus at the center of God's eternal purpose is a Person, Christ Jesus our Lord.

Note the order of these names: Christ, Jesus, Lord. This is no accident. "Christ" means "the anointed

One," the official title of Him who before time began was the Person of God in His redemptive purpose. "Jesus" is the personal name of the Son of God as God revealed Himself in history as Redeemer. "Lord" signifies this One as Lord of both the church and history.

Peter sums it up when he says, *"God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ"* (Acts 2:36). Note further that Paul is careful to place the name "Jesus" or "Jehovah is salvation" at the center: "Christ Jesus our Lord." Thus the Christ of eternity, the Lord of heaven and earth is manifested in history as Jesus. He is God revealing Himself in His eternal purpose of redemption.

History itself pays tribute to this fact by dating events as B. C. [before Christ] and A. D. [in the year of our Lord]. So whether nations receive Him or not, they give unconscious recognition to the truth that all history revolves about Him. Ralph Waldo Emerson was right when he said that "the name of Jesus is not so much written as plowed into the history of the world."

But the Bible says more. The fifth chapter of Revelation tells an interesting story. It centers about a book sealed with seven seals. An angel asks, *"Who is worthy to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof?"* To seal the book is to conceal its contents. To open the seals is to reveal its message.

Now John wept because no man in heaven, earth, or underneath the earth was able to open the book. But one of the elders said, *"Weep not: behold the Lion of the tribe of Juda, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof."* Then a *"Lamb as it*

had been slain . . . took the book." And the heavenly hosts sang, "Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation."

Now there are varied interpretations of this passage. To me the book is the book of history, the meaning of which is sealed. No man in heaven, on earth, or in hell, either living or dead, is able to give meaning to history. The only One who can do so is the Lamb that was slain, Jesus. Jehovah is salvation, who has redeemed us to God by His blood out of every kindred, tongue, people, and nation.

This is the Bible's way of saying that the key to the meaning of history is the redemptive will and purpose of God as seen in the Person of Jesus Christ who died on the cross and was raised from the dead. He is the living Presence, the Lord of history, the anointed one of God for our salvation.

A noted French scholar of another generation said that "all history is incomprehensible without Christ." Admitting this truth it would be an act of wisdom to reckon with Him in our present world of turmoil. He alone offers hope to a generation largely bereft of hope. Much of modern history has revolved about men who have offered themselves as saviours to given nations. Like the false messiahs which abounded in the years surrounding our Lord's sojourn on earth, they have served only to bathe the world in blood and to compound the misery and hopelessness of multiplied millions of people.

Almost half of the population of the earth today is in virtual slavery because it pinned its hopes on the false

promises and futile programs of men. Continents are in turmoil because people rising out of their despair asked for a fish and received a serpent, for bread and are fed with stones. And all the while Jesus still stands and calls as He did over a rebellious Jerusalem. "If thou hadst known, even thou, at least in this thy day, the things which belong unto thy peace! but now they are hid from thine eyes" (Luke 19:42).

Yes, they are hid from their eyes. The last word in this age will not be spoken by Khrushchev or any other world ruler. It will be spoken by Jesus Christ. But men do not know. And they cannot know except the people of Christ tell them.

Third, consider the personnel. How shall the nations know about this eternal purpose which God purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord? Paul says that it is "by [through] the church" (Eph. 3:10).

Now the word "church" is used in the New Testament to refer both to all the redeemed of all ages, and to the local church made up of a band of baptized believers banded together to carry on the work of the Lord in a given locality and throughout the world. It is of this latter that I speak.

In Ephesians 1:22-23 Paul speaks of "the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all." In Colossians 2:9 he speaks of Christ as the "fulness of the Godhead bodily [in bodily form]." Thus Christ in bodily form is all of God that men will see on this earth through the natural eye. Even so the church is the fulness of Christ, His body before men. It is all of Christ that men will see with the natural eye. It is through the churches and their message that history is brought face to face with

Christ and His redemptive will and work.

Why do dictators invariably seek to silence the churches? Because they know that they can never completely subjugate a people so long as the churches remain to witness to the claims of Christ and His redemption for men.

A young man chided his pastor for not joining an Anti-Communist organization. "But," said the pastor, "I have been a member of such an organization for many years—a church of the Lord Jesus Christ."

The program of Christ centers in His churches. To them, and to no other organization, He gave His commission to evangelize the world. And it is in times and areas where the churches have been most active and vital in preaching the gospel of redemption that tyranny has had its least success.

Never before has there been a greater need for Christian people to rally to Christ's call through their churches. Some years ago Doctor William Ward Ayer issued a ringing challenge.

"We must once again honor the Church. Well meaning . . . laymen branch out in evangelical enthusiasm; then forgetting their churches, they start their own programs and weaken the program of their church by absenting themselves from it and withholding their gifts to its service both at home and abroad. Thereby they violate the teaching of the Word and the plan of God and help destroy the one divine institution—the Church.

"Youth movements today are harnessing a Niagara of power, but all too often they are failing to wire it up with the Christ-founded organization of the Christian Church, so that while

a testimony is maintained, the power is not permanently conserved . . . Satan is a strategist, a military strategist. He is not opposed to souls being won if he can finally destroy the one institution that God has given for the preservation of the faith."*

The church is at the center of God's eternal purpose. And for that reason Satan hates it and seeks to destroy it. All who hate Satan and his evil designs, and love God and His eternal purpose, should love the church and give through it your unflinching love, loyalty, and service.

Several years ago Billy Graham and I were talking about evangelism. I said, "Billy, I believe in you and what you are doing. I wish God would raise up a thousand like you. But I have been telling pastors in evangelistic conferences that we cannot simply turn over to Billy Graham the responsibility for evangelizing the world. God's redemptive purpose is still through His churches. I hope you understand that I am not opposing you."

"Yes," replied Billy, "I understand. But will you do me a favor. The next time that you say it will you quote me as having said it."

Yes, the eternal purpose of God which centers in Christ Jesus our Lord is to be made known through His churches, through yours and mine. Someone has said that if you would live life to its maximum, then find out where God is going and go along with Him. This is the unifying principle of history, the redemptive work of Christ, and the task of His churches. It is the call of God to you and me. God grant that we shall hear and respond to His call! ●

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