

The Convention Sermon, "The Everlasting Gospel"
by A. B. Van Arsdale on May 25, 1961.

Acts 1:1

The simultaneous termination of His anointed life and appointed labor was the unique accomplishment of Jesus. Though His days on earth were limited to a span of some 33 years, yet He could say to the all-wise God, "I have finished the work Thou gavest me to do." No song was unsung, no message was undelivered, no deed was undone. The Father's perfect will for Him was completed. Life to Him was primarily an engagement with God that carried tremendous responsibilities of service. Joyously did He accept that commission as evidenced by His word, "I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of Him that sent me" (Jno. 6:38). That will was redemptive as evidenced by the statements, "the Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" and "the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister." To One with the glory of God as the goal of His heart, life and labor were synonymous.

Christ-loving, historically-minded Dr. Luke, led of the Holy Spirit, recorded the life and labors of Jesus in order that his beloved friend, Theophilus, "mightest know the certainty of those things" wherein he had been instructed. That record is known unto us as the Gospel recorded by Luke. Luke's account isn't the Gospel. Fundamentally, Jesus Himself is the Gospel. Paul wrote the Corinthians that he had declared unto them the Gospel. What was it? The Christ who died, was buried, rose again, and revealed Himself unto many! Christ living is the Good News that God has aligned Himself with man in the difficulties of human life;

Christ crucified is the Good News that God has paid the debt that man could never pay; Christ risen is the Good News that God has made available unto man a power that can conquer every enemy; Christ ascended is the Good News that a Divine-human Intercessor, knowing that willing spirits may be offset by weakened flesh, always represents us. Grand and glorious though the actions of the historical Jesus may be, I must insist that they, fundamentally, are not the Gospel. The Gospel is Jesus, not the relating of His works but the revelation of the Worker. With the account of the Ascension Luke doubtlessly felt that the full story of the Godman had been told. However, subsequent events had revealed that the Good News was not complete with the account of the historical Jesus. As the Father had completed His work of creation but continued the work of revelation, so the Son, having completed His work of atonement, was continuing the work of redemption. The gospel account had told only of what "Jesus began to do and to teach." But the ascended Christ was still in the spiritual arena transforming hell-deserving sinners into heaven-destined saints. The Book of Acts is Luke's postscript to his gospel to tell the Good News that Jesus continues to do and teach. The Gospel is not simply that Jesus died to purchase redemption, but also that He lives to perform redemption.

"How do you know you are safe?" asked a little girl of an older playmate as they softly sang "Safe In The Arms of Jesus." After a moment's study the older one answered, "Because I am holding on to Jesus with both hands, tight." After a while there came another plaintive question, "But suppose Satan were to come and cut off both your hands?" For a moment the child was troubled, then, "O I forgot! Jesus is holding me, and Satan can't cut off both His hands."

That little girl had discovered a Person who was active in providing her safety. Luke wanted all mankind to realize that same Person is active in our salvation.

Some of the very teachings that he had recorded should have alerted Luke to the truth of the unfinished gospel. Had not Jesus said, "I am come to send fire on the earth . . . But I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how am I straitened till it be accomplished" (Lu. 12:49-50)? The Master Himself had revealed that much of His work could not be accomplished until a certain baptism, peculiar to Himself, should come about. That baptism was His immersion in suffering by His crucifixion and His emersion in glorious power by His resurrection. "He died unto sin once; but in that He liveth, He liveth unto God" says Paul. He liveth in that new life of His glorified humanity. That new life unshackled Him to send His promised "fire upon the earth." After His resurrection He said "ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence" (Acts 1:5) and at Pentecost "cloven tongues like as of fire . . . sat upon each of them." The promise of fire was fulfilled. Through that company of regenerated, Spirit-anointed believers, the unstraitened Jesus was given an enlarged sphere of operation. Through them He continued His work of grace and perpetuated the Everlasting Gospel of redemption.

The Apostle Paul added a second postscript to this unfolding story with the words "Ye are our epistle . . . known and read of all men" (2 Cor. 3:2). The Corinthian church was to be a living epistle of what Christ continues to do and teach. And each member was to be a paragraph in that story. Each

member, who had been made partaker of the Divine nature, had the wonderful privilege of revealing the Everlasting Gospel of the redeeming Christ. Oh, that Christians today would grasp that fact and

"While passing thro' this world of sin,
And others your life shall view,
Be clean and pure without, within,
Let others see Jesus in you."

The principles and practices that guided Him in His straitened condition are operative in His liberated one.

Then and now, His activity was and is creation.

The ability, might, and power of the Eternal Christ are graphically revealed in His creatorship. Paul declared "by Him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by Him and for Him" (Col. 1:16). It was the pre-incarnate Christ who hung the stars like diamonds in a moon-bathed night, placed the shrinking violets in the dew-laden grasses, and mixed the colors in the golden sunset to make a beautiful world in which His people were to live. Of that Christ we sing.

"He's got the whole wide world in His hand,"
but even more, He's got the whole wide world in His heart.

Continues Creative Work

In His incarnate life He continues His work of creation, but this was the new creation. The Bible tells of it in the words "if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17 RSV), and "we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works" (Eph. 2:10). It was that completely new life that

Jesus revealed to Nicodemus as He spoke of the new birth. Salvation is not a repair job on a marred and scarred life but a rebirth into an entirely different one. It is not the cleansing of a human life but the conferring of the God-life.

John declared, "This is the promise that He hath promised us, even eternal life" (1 Jno. 2:25). Eternal is that which has neither beginning nor ending. The Christian's life is not something that has a beginning and then goes on everlastingly, but something that has neither beginning nor ending. It is the God-life. Jesus said "I am the life," and John wrote, "this is the record, that God hath given to us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He that hath the Son hath (literally, the) life" (1 Jno. 5:11-12). The Son Himself is eternal life. To have Him is to become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4). Regeneration imparts to the penitent believer the very life of God Himself. This is the amazing, marvelous, Good News of the Everlasting Gospel. This has been the design of Jesus from the beginning.

The early Christian activity recorded in Acts is Luke's effort to show the the Eternal Christ, now glorified at the Father's right hand, continues to perform that work of creation. He it was who stood to welcome the first martyr, a saint of His own making. He it was who arrested maddened Saul on the Damascus road and recreated him into Paul the Apostle. He it was who, proclaimed by Philip as fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, created anew the Ethiopian eunuch. He it was who universalized His gospel by means of the lowered sheet filled with all manner of beasts and achieved a newly created Cornelius. He it was who took a rebellious, runaway slave, Onesimus, and re-created him into a brother

beloved and profitable. In His physical life He transformed many into children of God. In His glorified life He works among Orientals and Occidentals, among peasants and plenipotentiaries, among races and religions to take broken, blighted, bewildered humanity and create it anew into blessed, believing, born-again children of God.

Does Perfect Work

We may "dip 'em and drap 'em" but not so the Christ. The work which begins in foreknowledge will never end until He presents us blameless and glorified unto the Father. He would have us "perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect." Regeneration, justification, and glorification are all integral parts of His redemptive program. He does and shall continue to call, intercede, prod the conscience, and impart truth until we attain the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. This is His ultimate design.

Then and now His Associate was and is the Comforter.

An amazing truth concerning the accomplishments of the historical Jesus is readily discernible to the reverent student of the Bible. Jesus was the God-man. He was as much God as if not man at all, yet as much man as if not God at all. There is no question but what all the power of Deity was available unto Him. Yet He chose to live and labor as man, depending upon the leadership and power of the Holy Spirit.

The impact of the Spirit in His life is clearly seen. When Mary received the annunciation, she asked, "How shall this be, seeing that

I know not a man?" The answer immediately came "the Holy Ghost shall come upon thee . . . therefore, that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God" (Lu. 1:34-35). Beyond question the activity of the Spirit in this matter was for the purpose of making the seed holy. Well might we note in passing that here is the answer to the discussions concerning the Virgin Birth. Had the seed been the product of a man, the Spirit would have come upon him to insure the holiness of the seed. But the Bible states, "In the fullness of time God brought forth His Son, made of a woman" (Gal. 4:4). No man was sire unto Jesus. A virgin was the only human instrument of the incarnation. And her child was the unique Son of God, not only the begotten, but the only begotten Son of God. He was the Eternal Son breaking into human history.

A Russellite questioned the essential deity of Jesus with the words, "you say Jesus is the Eternal Son and is equal to the Eternal Father. If he is a son, he cannot be as old as the Father. If he is not as old as the Father, he is not eternal. If he is not eternal, he is not God." His preacher listener replied, "I will answer you with your own words. You speak of the Eternal Father. None can be a father until he has a son. An Eternal Father calls for an Eternal Son."

Work of the Spirit

The ministry of the Holy Spirit accomplished the well-nigh incomprehensible mystery of bringing the Eternal Son into the world as the historical Jesus.

Further revelation of the dynamic relationship between the second and

third Persons of the Trinity is seen in the wilderness experience. Luke declares that He "was led by the Spirit into the wilderness" (Lu. 4:1) and then "returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee" (Lu. 4:4). In the full consciousness of that power Jesus returned to His home town of Nazareth. There with all deliberation He opened the scroll to the words of Isaiah, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He hath anointed me to preach the gospel . . . He hath sent me to heal, etc." (Lu. 4:18). It was with that anointment that He opened blind eyes, cleansed defiled lepers, restored the dead to loved ones, and spake as none other ever spake. Jesus Himself intimated that He "cast out devils by the Spirit of God" (Mt. 12:28).

Most assuredly the God-man could have performed His ministry through His essential Deity. But in His incarnation He chose to empty Himself "and was made in the likeness of men" (Phil. 2:7). He chose to be an example of what man should be and could be. Man, as he should be, is man anointed and empowered by the Spirit to perform the will of God. It was thus that the Incarnate Christ worked.

As he neared the time of departure from this earth, the Spirit-empowered Jesus said, "He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do: because I go unto my Father. . . And I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may abide with you forever" (Jno. 14:12, 16). That Comforter is the same Spirit that empowered Him. Now that Spirit was promised unto man, whosoever believeth on Christ, As He began His work in His physical body,

so would He continue His work in His spiritual body, the church. The Book of Acts is the thrilling record of His accomplishments through that Spirit-led church.

To continue His work He must have hands and feet, hearts and tongues at His disposal. Dr. C. Roy Angell recounts a beautiful story of occupational troops in a French village after the war. With time hanging heavy on their hands, they decided to help rebuild some of the bombed buildings. They started with the church. Cheerfully they labored at clearing the debris, installing windows, and rebuilding pews. Amid the debris they found a marble statue of Christ and lovingly cemented it together. However, they could not find the hands, search though they may. The marred statue was restored to its niche, and in a moment of inspiration one of the soldiers hung a placard underneath with the words, "He has no hands but yours."

"Christ has no hands but our hands to do His work today;
He has no feet but our feet to lead men in His way;
He has no tongues but our tongues to tell men why he died;
He has no help but our help to bring them to His side.
What if our hands are busy with other work than His?
What if our feet are treading where sin's allurements is?
What if our tongues are speaking of things His lips would spurn?
How can we hope to help Him and hasten His return?

His plan was and is to take one "dead in trespasses and sins" and re-create him unto good works, specifically the good work of evangelizing humanity. Since it "is the Spirit that quickeneth" (Jno. 6:63), Jesus declared, "It is expedient for you that I go away; for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send Him unto you. And when He is come, He will convict the world of sin, and of righteousness, and of

judgment" (Jno. 16:7-8). Conquest will come when believers qualify themselves for the enduement of the Spirit. The Spirit will convict the sinners when He controls the saints.

May I now recall to your attention the teaching of Paul that churches are living epistles that reveal the good news of redemption and that each member is a paragraph. For that member to make his paragraph a memorable one, he must be anointed and possessed by the Spirit. To render this possible Jesus promised "if ye, then, being evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall the Heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him" (Lu. 11:13).

The Churches Emphasized

Of all the blessings that we could carry away from this Convention, none can surpass in importance the implanting of this truth in our churches. Those churches are to portray the good news that Christ continues to redeem. They are His vehicle of activity. Paul stated, "we are laborers together with God" (1 Cor. 3:9). I am fully mindful that he spoke thus concerning Apollos and himself, but most assuredly it is likewise true of every Spirit-anointed witness in the world today. Through us He would continue His work of recreation. To work with Him we need His power, and His power was and is the Comforter. Go back to your churches! Electrify them to yield themselves to the possession of the Spirit. Agonize with and for them until He takes control. Then the world shall be hold the good news that Jesus still redeems.

Then and now His aim was and is the crowds.

People are the most important thing in the world to Him. It was for the

"multitude that no man could number" that He came, died, arose, ascended, now lives, and shall return. He could see them coming from the north, south, east, and west, and in travail of His soul was satisfied. Sinners they were, needing the grace of God, but He knew what they could become. The crowds were important to Him then, and they are important to Him now. Though He saves men only as individuals, yet He yearns over all. That yearning produced His commission, "ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth" (Acts 1:8). His was no regional, national, nor continental program. His desire was to constrain the masses of humanity everywhere to be reconciled to God.

In the fulfillment of that desire two things are apparent.

One, Jesus attracted the crowds. None can deny that this was true as He began to do and teach. We read, "there followed Him great multitudes of people from Galilee, and from Decapolis, and from Jerusalem, and from Judea, and from beyond Jordan" (Mt. 4:25). The picture is enhanced by the multitude of 5,000 men, not counting women and children, who were fed following His message. They were a people who, in order to hear again the words of life, out-spied the Christ as He sought a brief season of retirement. Mark recorded "again He entered Capernaum . . . and straightway many were gathered together" (Mk. 2:1-2). Jesus made Himself so attractive that crowds were drawn to Him as the alnico magnet attracts metal filings.

Contrary to an opinion heard today, those crowds were not limited to the downtrodden and nameless riffraff. True it is that the King James version says

"the common people heard Him gladly." But we need to examine that scripture. The word translated "common" is used at least 346 times in the New Testament. Here is the only time it is translated "common." 185 times it is translated "many;" 71 times it is translated "much;" and 59 times it is translated "great" from the standpoint of number. The truth of this scripture is that multitudes of all kinds of people heard Him gladly -- doctors of Jewish law, centurions of the Roman government, devotees of Greek philosophy as well as fishermen, lepers, publicans, etc. Jesus had a message that touched the down-and-outs and up-and-outs at the same time.

Thus He began. Thus He continued during the first century through His spiritual body in Jerusalem, Ephesus, Corinth, and Rome. But how is it today? As we look at half-empty church houses, we are prone to wonder if He has lost His attractiveness for the multitudes. But wait! Is He no longer attractive, or is He tragically absent? Have the open, flagrant sins of the flesh among church members and the more insidious sins of the spirit among the ministers driven Him from our midst? Has the modern tendency to play church rather than to practice Christianity left Him outside? Perhaps our problem, as suggested by G. Campbell Morgan, is not to get the crowd into our churches but to get Christ into them. With Him there it will again be as it was in Capernaum, "it was noised abroad that He was in the house" and the multitudes will come together. His presence cannot be concealed, but neither can it be counterfeited. Our programs are not necessarily the same as His presence. It is the Christ that attracts and not our committees, the

Mediator and not our music, the Redeemer and not our rituals. I do not mean that these without Christ are meaningless, but these with Christ will mean multitudes drawn. He attracted them as He began His work. The Living Christ will attract them still when He is manifested.

Attracted by Crowds

The second apparent thing is that the crowds attracted Him. No more heart-warming statement is to be found than the words, "when He saw the multitudes, He was moved with compassion" (Mt. 9:36). Personally, I think that the Sermon on the Mount should be interpreted as setting forth the principles of a winning Christianity in view of those multitudes. Like the prodigal, man may go away from the Father's house, but he cannot get out of His heart. No mother can love a wayward son as Christ loves a sinning race.

"I stand amazed in the presence of Jesus the Nazarene,
And wonder how He could love me, a sinner, condemned, unclean."

It was this "Pull of the People" that drew Him repeatedly from the occasionally sought seasons of retirement. He was the challenging example followed by the loved bishop who received the epitaph "Here rests a man who never rested here." This pull was the compelling force that drove Him from village to village, sacrificing all that He might minister to everyone possible.

Dr. C. E. Mathews, a while before his death, told of the most eloquent prayer he had ever heard. It was the prayer of a woman, a member of the colored race, a devoted follower of Jesus. In her prayer she thanked her Lord for all His blessings upon her, then offered herself back to Him in service.

She concluded, "and when You are through with this poor old soul on this earth, let me come into heaven dragging tired."

That was the spirit of Jesus. He saw the multitudes of every clime and every century. That vision caused Him to say "ye shall be witness unto me." He reached for them in His earthly body, and Luke tells us how He reached for them in His spiritual body in the first century. To the searching eunuch in the desert, He sent the evangelist Philip. To the anxious Cornelius. He sent Simon Peter. To the worshipping women by the riverside at Philippi, the argumentative philosophers on Mars Hill, the rag tags of society in Corinth, and the idol worshippers of Ephesus, He sent the Apostle Paul.

Has He changed today? Does He no longer reach for them? Is He contented with those already reached? Is He no longer moved with compassion for those who are as a sheep without a shepherd? The answer is "No!" Ninety-nine in the fold form no excuse for neglecting the one that is lost. Neither should the handful in our churches erase the vision of the multitudes. So anxious is He over the crowds that He might shock some of us were He to visit our towns. I am not at all sure but what He would by-pass our half-empty churches and go to the well-filled theaters and stadiums where the crowds are. Remember that He came not to be ministered unto but to minister; He came not to enjoy services but to engage in service. Today, the pious might criticize Him for by passing a dimly lit and slightly attended church service, but He would give them the plain, simple words of life. So well established in His desire that, if you would travel with Jesus, you must

go to the ends of the earth seeking the lost for that is where He is going.

This is the Good News that has never ended and will never end until Jesus comes again. It is the Everlasting Gospel The Christ who lived, still lives; The Saviour who transformed men, still transforms men! The multitudes who drew Him still draw Him! The Spirit who empowered Him in the fleshly body still empowers in the spiritual body! He came to reach men; He died to redeem men; He lives to re-create men. Until that angel stands with one foot on the land and the other on sea to declare that time is over, I for one, would offer myself anew unto Him saying,

"Out of the shame of my coward heart;
Out of my might of defeat;
Lift me, O God, to the battle again;
Cover my bitter retreat.
Out of despising my weakness and rout,
Out of the love of Thy soul:
Purge me, O purge me with hyssop, dear Christ,
Give me my spirit made whole.
Beaten, but still undefeated, I pray
Thou, of unconquerable hand,
Reach me my poor, broken saber again,
I pledge Thee to die or stand.
By the wonder of heaven's forgiveness,
By the lovely lure of Thy light,
By the spirit of victory eternal,
God, fling me again to the flight."

He began blessing! He continued blessing! And today rich and poor, old and young, black and white are saved by the Eternal Gospel of the Eternal Son. To Him be blessing, and honour, and glory, and power forever and everywhere, world without end! Hallelujah, what a Gospel! And what a Saviour!