

Convention Sermon by Landrum P. Leavell, II  
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"The Church With A Future"

Acts 20:16-32

We are living in the day of the image breaker, commonly called the iconoclast. When we look about we see institutions and organizations once considered sacrosanct or holy, have now been deposed, trampled, criticized and maligned. Everything seems to have changed. Clergyman and laity alike do strange things in the name of Christianity. In our topsy-turvy world, for instance, we posit a Christianity that demands the "death of God." We endorse sexual promiscuity as illustrative of redemptive love and create conflict as an instrument of reconciliation, all of which is foreign to everything that we have ever believed and held true. In fact, our world has become so mixed up that a recent visitor to Wichita Falls indicated, according to newspaper reports, that LSD was useful in opening spiritual vistas. It seems we've fallen prey to the accusation directed against Peter in the Garden. We are "fighting the battles of light with the weapons of darkness." The strident babel of voices being heard on every hand has created a confusion resulting in paralyzing inertia for the work of the Kingdom of God. Because the growth curve of the Kingdom of God has levelled out with Christian people milling about in confusion and uncertainty, 20th Century pallbearers have lined up in funeral array waiting to carry out the remains of the church.

I read an article recently entitled "The Post Biblical Era." Many articles written bearing various titles -- all suggesting ours is the post-Christian era. This is the spirit of our generation, so we are confronted by a dilemma. In the midst of the voices heard around us we can still hear the

have already been written bearing various titles--all suggesting ours is the post-Christian era. This is the spirit of our generation, so we are confronted by a dilemma. In the midst of the voices heard around us we can still hear the confident statement of the Lord Jesus: "I will build My church . . . the gates of hades shall not prevail against it." I think we do well to ask ourselves the question--Is the church eternal? Will the church survive the 20th Century? Candor forces us to confess that the institutionalized church may well die and cease to exist. My congregation does not have God under obligation to it! God is not obligated to bless us! The only promise that God made is that He will act faithfully when we meet His conditions! Now if Jesus Christ is right, "I will build My church and the gates of hades shall not prevail against it," then the premature funeral oration being preached in many quarters of our world is nothing more than the idle prattle of fools. On the other hand, if "they" are right, Jesus Christ is an impostor, a liar, and a deceiver! Whom do you believe?

Paul reminded the Ephesian elders that the road would be rocky and rough. In fact, Paul said, conflict and trouble and opposition would come! Paul said it would come from two sources--without and within. From without, he said there would be humans like grievous wolves descending upon that little flock of Christians. They would spare not the flock! From within (and this is a fact we need to underscore) there would arise men numbered among the believers speaking perverse things and trying to lead away the flock after heresy. Paul's words could not have been more prophetic nor true--for from that day until this the battle has continued--all the way from the Gnostic heresy to the present reincarnation of

Gnosticism under the label "New Theology." New Theology is not new for it's simply the same thing from different men! It is the same philosophy with different lips articulating it! There has been the denial of the divinity of Jesus Christ from the first century until now. We're simply facing the same thing other Christians have faced. There's nothing new about the new morality--in fact, it's the old, old immorality and the new theology is not new for it's the same deviation other heretics have espoused from the days of Jesus Christ on earth until this very hour!

There is, however, a church within the church. Among those numbered on church rolls there are found the faithful. These can be designated in many ways but perhaps the terminology of the Old Testament is best. This group has been called "God's holy remnant." That remnant exists today and it's against this church that the gates of Hell shall not prevail! Jesus said it, I believe it and stand firmly upon it! That church--the Church With A. Future-- will bear several obvious characteristics. I believe it will be Captivated by Obsession, Cognizant of Obstacles, and finally Correlated by Obeisance. Look first of all at this initial characteristic.

#### Captivated by Obsession

There is more than one way to revolutionize society. If you want to be a part of a revolution to turn the United States upside down, you may pull down everything, destroy all of the old forms, replace them, become an iconoclast. That's one way to revolutionize a society. Consider nothing sacred or holy and let the iconoclast drive with a firm foot floorboarding the accelerator! Destroy everything! Tear it all down! Start from scratch! That's one way to revolutionize

society. Yet I call upon you to remember there is another way. One may also revolutionize society by filling the old forms with men of a new spirit! We can become fed up with our democracy, the way of life that we know in America. We can replace democracy with a dictatorship--or totalitarian rule. That's one way. May it please God to prevent that from ever happening!

The second way of changing our way of life or corrupt democracy is to elect righteous men to positions of responsibility! Now this same principle holds true in the work in the Kingdom of God. When decadence is discerned in the work of the church, one may pursue one of two paths. You may destroy the church, remove it from the physical scene and start over . . . or you may replace the old forms with new men--men who have been transformed, not by a desire to elevate society, but who have been transformed by an encounter with Jesus Christ, men who have become new creatures in Jesus! When that's done, the church will be changed and the decadence will be removed.

Look at the ways of Jesus. He is our pattern. Jesus Christ never organized or led a protest march . . . not in all His earthly ministry. Jesus Christ never carried a placard, He never picketed the Roman Forum, though slavery was a permanent, insidious institution in His generation. Jesus did not use the methods of the modern iconoclast. He spent no time in a denunciation of Caesar or the Roman way. His methods were wholly different from ours, yet the result of the life and the ministry of Jesus Christ has been the abolition of slavery, the elevation of all human rights, and the salvation of all who believe. He possessed a magnificent obsession! His obsession was not with sociological things, his obsession was with soteriological things. He was not primarily interested in matters of sociology, He

was interested in matters of salvation and redemption from sin! When He put his emphasis on that point all these other things fell into their proper category.

Recall the earthly ministry of our Lord. Coming forth from His wilderness temptation beginning the sublime task of reconciling the world unto Himself, He began by speaking with two men on a country road. What an inauspicious beginning! But those two men followed Him. Then He chose twelve, and out of those twelve Andrew found Peter, Peter found Nathaniel--and so it moved out. Our Lord didn't meet many people, but "as many as met Him were made whole!" This was the obsession of His life.

J. W. Drutch, in a very interesting little essay titled, "Eternity or the Franklin Stove, " observed: "undoubtedly, the, the world has grown steadily more comfortable and the spread of comfort has not been confined merely to physical things. Not only has the rigor of the seasons been modified but the terror of the unknown world has been abolished as well, since he who gives up his hope of heaven may at the same time relieve himself of his fears of hell . . . we've settled into a sort of bourgeois security, and bourgeois security has its own dull comforts, for if we have not much to gain, neither do we have much to lose." Jesus Christ was not obsessed by any such spirit of mediocrity! I believe Krutch is devastatingly accurate in his description of our day.

That's not the sort of obsession which controlled the life of the Lord Jesus Christ. He had no desire to live out His days on earth and finish with a record of no hits, no runs and no errors! How many of us are thus content? Jesus Christ risked His all to bring men to God, and Jesus Christ Who so risked and gave Himself

said to all of us who follow Him, "as the Father hath sent Me, so send I you."

Dear friend, have you ever inserted your name in place of that pronoun "you"?

That's what the Christian faith is all about, "So send I you," He is our example.

We are to follow His pattern.

Many of us have become obsessed with the matter of "image." We're concerned with what people think of us. We want to be liked, and yet most of have fears that we won't be. Jesus Christ was not concerned with His image! Our concern is a deviation from the pattern of Jesus Christ. If our Lord had been concerned with what people thought, He never would have chosen the Via Dolorosa, the way of sorrows, nor the way of Calvary, for He died the most despicable of all deaths--crucifixion on a Roman cross-- the death as a common thief! In so doing He died, one man for all men. He was not concerned for the opinions of human beings. He was concerned with pleasing the Heavenly Father. With that as His obsession He says to you and men, "so send I you." Jesus defined His own ministry in this way: "The Son of Man has come to seek and save that which is lost." The church with a future must be obsessed with the same obsession, seeking and saving those who are lost. This is our primary function!

The great Japanese Christian, Kagawa, spent the last twelve years of his life living in the most despicable, utterly horrid place in all the world. They say the slum area around Kobe, Japan, is filled with the most debauched, depraved, diseased people in all the world. It was precisely to that spot Kagawa went to make his home living among those people because his life was captivated by an obsession . . . the same obsession which motivated Jesus Christ. That great Christian had set himself to the accomplishment of one goal in life. Do you remember what it was?

His goal was to lead one million of his fellow Japanese to a saving faith in Jesus. While he lived in that area near Kobe, he contracted one disease after another which sapped his strength and ultimately brought about his untimely demise. Yet Kagawa identified himself with his people and with Jesus Christ! Now such an obsession in your life and mine will bring condemnation, criticism and misunderstanding. Someone will be quick to say, "he has become fanatic on the subject of religion." If we are worried about our image, we'll back down, We will try to placate people even though we displease God. The church with a future-- that church that will live forever must be captivated by an obsession. There's another characteristic. Dear friends, we must be

#### Cognizant of Obstacles

I'm sure every person here can give some sort of critique on the church of the 20th Century. You could describe what you feel are the ills besetting the church. In my judgment the one great ill, the sickness that will render the church impotent is neglect of the Holy Spirit. I wish that I knew more of Him and His ministry, but there is one thing I know. I know when my actions are prompted by His presence and I know when my life is lived by selfish and ulterior motives! I read again and again that second chapter of Acts, for there we have the first instance of captivation or possession by the Holy Spirit. What was the result of the Spirit's possession of that church? Why, when they went out from their prayer meeting people said, "they're drunk! They've been drinking new wine!" Those people didn't understand, yet one thing is true. Skeptics knew something was different about those folks. They knew that whatever was

motivating them was not natural! They weren't continuing with "business as usual!" There was something completely changed about them! The only way nonbelievers and scoffers could explain it was to say: "why, they're drunk!" I've never been drunk. I don't know how it feels. I've never tasted beer, wine or whiskey and I thank God and my parents for that fact. However, I know some characteristics of drunkenness. The obvious characteristic is that the motor center of life is completely dominated by that narcotic! One does not act normally when he is under the influence of an alcoholic beverage! A drunk person is not normal. That's precisely true of the possession of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer. When we walk out of our churches on Sunday morning about ten minutes after twelve to continue business as usual the world laughs up its sleeve at us. The world says, "Oh yeah, look at them. There's nothing different about them." Dear friends, in all too many cases they're right. When we go out under the impulse of the Spirit of God, there is a new control in the motor center of our lives . . . a new motive and a new purpose. Only then does the world sit up and begin to take notice.

I believe our way of life probably is epitomized in the beatnik philosophy. The beatnik philosophy can be summed up in two words, and it has touched every one of us -- whether we are clean shaven, well dresses or not. The beatnik philosophy is summed up in the words "ungrateful" and "undisciplined." Broadly speaking, it's the psychology of a spoiled child who has received so much so frequently that he has no gratitude. We've not disciplined ourselves when it comes to the externals of the Kingdom of God. Why, 70% of my congregation still quibbles about 10% . . . when a few are thinking in terms of 100%.



Undisciplined. Ungrateful. We've grown up physically, but emotionally we still possess the characteristics of the beatnik philosophy.

I suppose that there are many other obstacles we could name but I'm very much aware of the growing cleavage between education and evangelism. In our denomination there are those who subconsciously or consciously believe that evangelism is a product of ignorance, while others believe the well educated must be anti-evangelistic or anti-spiritual. There seems to be very little middle ground left for any who are not extremists. Let me hasten to affirm that our Lord never intended evangelism to be a haven for mediocrity. He was the greatest of all evangelists, and at the same time He possessed all knowledge. He was the greatest intellectual Who has ever lived in the history of the world.

A well educated person is not relieved of his responsibility to be a witness. A person who has received a good education is not exempt from his obligation to grow in the likeness of Christ! The man who possesses the ability to read and study the Bible yet refuses to read and study it is no better off than the man who does not possess the ability to read it. What good is the ability to read and study if we do not put it to use?

Reading the New Testament we come to the Book of Acts. There as we read we discover the glorious victory won by the forces of Jesus Christ in the Kingdom enterprise. Acts describes the thrilling story of how the gospel leaped over every known barrier until the conclusion of Acts where Paul is pictured in his own hired house in the City of Rome, the capital of the world, preaching the gospel unhinderedly. What a glorious and thrilling story it is!

Then we read the Corinthian correspondence. We find that what all of the

armed might of pagan Rome was unable to do in retarding and abolishing the work of the Kingdom, disagreement among Christians was able to accomplish. The one thing that stymied Kingdom progress was not external persecution from all Rome's legions but the one thing that retarded the work of the Kingdom was bickering and disagreement among the people of God! That, dear friends, remains as an obstacle with which the Church of the Future must ever contend. Well, if these are our obstacles plus many more, what is our common denominator? What is the cohesive factor that holds together the people of the Lord in the work of the church? In my judgment, that common denominator is to be

#### Correlated by Obeisance

I don't mean obeisance to the opinions of men. I don't mean obeisance to modern theologians, as fine as they are. With all of the intellect of Barth, Bruner, and Tillich, plus the others, the obeisance to which I am referring is obeisance to Jesus Christ Who said, "ye shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." But add quickly to that, He also said, "I am the Truth." Now the truth Jesus was talking about is not always found in the opinions of men. Consequently we must return to our one primary source of information -- the Bible. We must come again and again to that other source of information, which is experience, and re-affirm our commitment to Him. If there is a Kingdom there must be a King! If there is no king there is no kingdom. We are citizens of the Kingdom of God and Jesus Christ is the King.

Do you remember the final exam Jesus gave Peter? He didn't question him about theology. He did that at a previous time. In the final exam He gave Peter,

Jesus questioned him about emotions. Three times He asked, "Peter, do you love me?" That's the obeisance which Christ demands and to which I am referring.

I I saw an interesting cartoon recently in the New Yorker magazine. It pictured two rather seedy looking students walking across a college campus. One of them disheveled, beard, hair awry, etc., looked at the other one and said, "I have a desperate need for commitment, and what happens?" Then he answered his own question, "I'm offered a job!" Well, you could see the disgust written on his face. He had a desperate need for commitment and someone offered him a job! Dear friends, obeisance to Jesus Christ involves a job. It's a job embodied in the Great Commission to the church to make disciples, baptize them, and teach and train them.

When I observe the morticians of the 20th Century standing greedily by, embalming fluid in hand ready to prepare the corpse of Christ's Eternal Church, I am reminded of a story by the Venerable Bead. He was one of those authors who lived back in the time of Cadman and those fellows. He described a weary plowman who one day looked up from his plowing and saw a great throng of people on the horizon rushing toward him. When the vanguard of the mass of humanity reach him, they began to shout at this plowman, "Haven't you heard? Haven't you heard?" He looked up from his plowing and asked, "Heard what?" They said, "Come on, Come on, the world is coming to an end." The plowman watched the people as they descended en masse, raising a tremendous cloud of dust. As they continued down the road, after a few moments wearily he shrugged his shoulders and said, "Whether that be so or not, I do not know, but in the meantime I have plowing to do." Dear Friends, this old world is coming to an end. But in the meantime

Jesus Christ has given us a job to do. It is a job that is to continue until that glorious hour when "the Kingdoms of this world are become the Kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and forever."