

REAFFIRMATION OF FAITH

Philippians 3:7-11

BY WARREN C. HULTGREN

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This is a very exciting and demanding day in which to be living. I would rather be living and serving today than in any other period of time I know. There is the clash of political ideologies, the accelerating thrust of science, the economic, racial and employment tensions of our day. These and a score of other crises remind us that this is a time in which we must declare God's Word. We must readjust our priorities and reaffirm our faith in the living Lord.

Against this background of anxiety and apprehension we must be sure that Christ is real in our lives. The truth is that the world is less and less impressed with the denominational nomenclature over our sanctuary doors. They do seek to see if what we preach and teach is personally meaningful, ethically determinative and spiritually transforming. Blaise Pascal, French mathematician of the Seventeenth Century, spoke wisely and well when he said that there is a vacuum in every life that only God can fill. The world, however, in its search for meaning and fulfillment must find it in Christ, and they will take note only when those of us who profess to possess Him live Christ-like lives, lives in which Christ is really real. Was it not Nietzsche who said that Christians must live more Christ-like lives before he could take seriously the thought of redemption.

It is to this need I address myself and share the hope that God will be enabled to speak to each of us.

I. LET US REAFFIRM OUR PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST.

Sir Conon Doyle was a British physician and Spiritist, who popularized Sherlock Holmes and gave us a score of other books. He told of once hearing a blasphemous, profane sailor cursing outside his stateroom on a ship's deck. The sailor was stripped to the waist, but his torso was covered with religious tatoos . . . large colored cross, crown of thorns, fish and other symbols. Doyle commented sarcastically, this was just another evidence that Christianity was usually only skin-deep. Too many feel that way about us even today.

Christian faith can be very superficial. Paul, writing as a battle-scarred servant of God, speaks of KNOWING

Christ. He uses the verb *ginoskein*. This is far more profound and much deeper than casual, intellectual understanding. It is the same word used in Genesis 4:1, where "Adam knew Eve . . . she conceived and bare Cain." To know Christ in this way suggests total surrender, complete yieldedness at the deepest, most spiritual levels of life. Paul was not questioning his conversion or salvation. He was asking for a loving, sharing, more meaningful life-changing relationship.

Every generation must resolve the recurrent heresy that good form, correct ritual, proper vocabulary and orthodox theology are all that it takes to please God. The ancient pagan religions of both Greece and Rome continued to be practiced long after the vitality of those religions disappeared. The Roman Empire, at the height of its power, influence and affluence, began to erode on the eastern fringes and they lost the British Isles. Romans could not have cared less. Basking in their political prominence and military invincibility, they were oblivious to what historians now tell us was true. A moral cancer had already eaten its deadly way into the vital organs of the body politic. Their political demise was already assured, the consequences of moral indifference and disintegration had done their deadly work . . . it was merely a matter of time. No military force ever conquered the Roman Legions, Rome fell apart, it lost its soul and lost its life. It is dangerous for any nation or denomination to assume perpetuity. To assume success is to assure failure.

Listen to these words: "This people draw near me with their mouth . . . honor me with their lips while their hearts are far from me." Again: "God, your people are talking about you in the streets and at the doors of their houses, saying one to another, 'Come and let us hear what is the word from the Eternal today!' They come to you as usual, they sit in front of you, they hear your words, but, they will not obey them; their lips are full of lies, their minds are set upon their selfish ends, and they heed you as they would a love-song beautifully rendered and well played . . . they hear your words but they will not obey them." See it again in Paul's inspired word to Titus: "They profess to know God, but they deny Him by their deeds."

The Christian faith is absolute surrender to the Lordship of Christ. Christ as Lord must make a difference in the lifestyle, decision-making process and the value structure of our lives. He is much more than peace of mind, problem solver, partner, provider, power source or purifier of our sins . . . He is LORD!

This concept causes us not only to evangelize but to worship. We must focus not only upon our weakness and our needs but upon the greatness, grandeur, grace and glory of God. "That I might know Him."

II. LET US REAFFIRM THE POWER OF OUR LIVING LORD.

A wise man once said that our problem is not so much that we are weak. It is that we are not as strong as we could be if we would only avail ourselves of the living presence and power of our lovely Lord. The early Christians did not feel it was their primary task to keep religion alive. Their personal experience kept the faith going, growing and glowing. "The Power of His Resurrection."

We have seen a resurgence of interest in the Holy Spirit within the last few years. I am amazed at the number of books that have been published about the person and work of the Holy Spirit. If you want to shake up an average church member ask the person, "What is your spiritual gift?" There are at least seventeen mentioned in the Epistles. These are not talents with which we were born but gifts of the Holy Spirit to every one of His children . . . not talents, gifts to do God's eternal work. We are to "stir up the gift that is within you." All these gifts are not equally valuable or necessary in our day but every Christian is divinely gifted of God.

The early Christians never celebrated Christmas though they believed in the Incarnation. The one great day in the early Christian calendar was Pentecost. Pentecost means fiftieth. Jesus ascended and fifty days after the Crucifixion the Holy Spirit descended. What is important is not *how* it happened but *what* happened. If we can remove the scaffolding . . . the wind, the fire, the speaking or hearing of known languages, then we see the *what*. Christians are indwelt and miraculously empowered to do the work and will of God. Unfortunately today, we find it infinitely easier to give gifts to each other at Christmas than to give ourselves to the Christ of Pentecost. The Holy Spirit did not come to magnify Himself. In the words of W. T. Connor, "The Holy Spirit did not come to take the place of an absent Lord but to make a living Lord real!"

The good news to a bruised, beaten, defeated discouraged, hungry, weary world is that "Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that He was buried, that He rose again the third day according to the scriptures" (I Corinthians 15:4).

There is no question in my mind but that many active members of our churches have a subtle, secret suspicion that there *must* be more to Christianity than they have seen, heard or personally experienced. This is true in every denomination. They are inspired by the music, the sermons are intellectually respectable, the fellowship seems unique and the building itself is lovely, yet, there is still something missing in many lives. They ask themselves if the church is just another social pressure group demanding a part of their time and a part of their money . . . they leave church still spiritually hungry and thirsty. Church attendance cannot, must not be an end within itself. If preaching, singing, serving and giving become ends within themselves we have missed the real heart and soul of our faith. We must touch the living Christ in and through our worship. This is precisely the difference between the historic Christ; we have stopped too soon. We proclaim a living Christ, available, adequate, commanding, demanding, convicting, comforting . . . alive and here now!

One of the distinctive ironies and tragedies of our day is that the greatest critics of the Christian faith are not the outsiders but the insiders. The real confusion caused in the minds of the world is the religious leader who obscures spiritual truth by a web of words and denials of the essential doc-

trines which constitute the foundation-stones of our faith. The whole Christian community needs a fresh infusion of spiritual power and purpose.

III. LET US REAFFIRM OUR COMMITMENT TO THE CROSS.

The scripture about which we are thinking says it like this, "being made conformable unto His death." We would to know what it means to take up our Cross daily and follow Him.

Several years ago I heard a very eminent journalist speak at the Brooklyn Navy Yard to several hundred ministers and priests from the greater New York area. He said that he had never been given a more difficult assignment. In preparation he said he had read the New Testament through several times and the Book of Acts through eleven times. The thing that worried him, however, was that there was nothing in modern-day Christianity that ever remotely resembled first century faith. Immediately I began to reason in my mind that his statement was not true. The cultural patterns have changed drastically, and we are the heirs of Christian influences within our society. I also reasoned that God works many things secretly and silently in the souls of persons . . . all that God is doing is not seen by man. Yet, in spite of this, we must confess that the grit and grace, vitality and dynamic of the early church has been cooled and compromised by those of us who are its spiritual off-spring and heirs.

The greatest success story of all human history has been the spread of the Christian gospel and its impact upon the world. Within fifty years of Christ's resurrection, there was a church in every major city of the Roman Empire. Nero (37-68 A.D.) said that he found a multitude of Christians to persecute. Pliny the Younger wrote to Trajan at the end of the first century and commented that Christians had "permeated not merely the cities but the villages and country places, so that the temples were nearly deserted." In the second century Tertullian, an early church father, wrote: "We are but of yesterday, and yet we have filled all your palaces, your cities, your islands, your castles, your towns, your council-houses, even your camps, your tribes, your senate, your forum. We have left you nothing but your temples." During the time of the Emperor Valerian (253-268), it is estimated that half the population of Rome was considered to be Christian. Then with the decision of Constantine the whole Roman Empire was brought under the influence of the Christian gospel. All of this within 300 years after our Lord's death, burial and resurrection. The world was turned upside-down because it was wrong-side-up.

We smiled when we read about the Crusade Billy Graham conducted in San Francisco. A minister there came out to denounce the evangelistic effort and predicted it would put Christianity in the San Francisco area back two hundred years. After a very successful crusade there, Mr. Graham spoke to the ministers and the press. In the course of his remarks, he indicated he wanted to apologize for failing. He said, "I did not want to set Christianity back two hundred years, I wanted to set it back two thousand years!" This means a life centered in Christ rather than in things, in His Will rather than our own . . . a life of selfless service for others in Christ's name.

In one of the articles appearing after the death of Albert Schweitzer, he said that a great change came over him one day when "it dawned upon me that every man must learn to bear his share of the suffering of the world." In Irving

Stone's remarkable biographical novel, *"The Agony and the Ecstasy,"* the author has Michelangelo discussing his dreams, visions, aspirations and ambitions with the man to whom he was apprenticed. The master sculptor said to Michelangelo, "Dedication is expensive; it will cost your life." Irving Stone shows great insight when he has the young Michelangelo reply, "What else is life for?" This is to say that life is never as meaningful, significant or satisfying until we lose it in service to others . . . deny yourself, take up your cross daily and follow Him . . . to be "made conformable unto His death."

IV. LET US REAFFIRM OUR CONFIDENCE AND VICTORY IN HIM.

This thought is suggested to us as we consider "the resurrection from among the dead." No one can take the scripture seriously and not realize that as there was a beginning of things as we know them, there shall also be an end. The thought of history culminating is not only the teaching of God's Word but also the result of human logic. We come to understand that history not only has movement, but it has purpose and destiny. History is not a broken record simply repeating itself century after century. History is in progressive cycles as it moves forward through the ages to its ultimate conclusion.

Men have always instinctively and intuitively been creatures of hope. We have known that as sure as God is God, there must be a time when wrongs are righted, vice receives its retribution and virtue its reward. Because ours is a world of moral law and spiritual realities, there must be an end to history as we know it and share it. Man's hope is as old as time. Job was able to see beyond his day to the new day in God. Sir Thomas Moore wrote *"Utopia"* as Plato wrote *"Republic"* in which they envisioned a better and an ideal world. James Hilton wrote a book that will be read repeatedly, *"Lost Horizon."* Here he speaks of Shangri La, the magic land where there is no aging, sickness or suffering . . . down deep inside, man has always looked and longed for such a place. More recently in the writings of Pierre Teilard de Chardin, men have been excited as he suggests the inevitable social evolution which will bring into being God's Kingdom on earth. His writings have appealed to many who were formerly enamored by the often atheistic existentialist with his doctrine of futility, meaninglessness, helplessness and hopelessness. Man by nature is an aspiring creature of hope . . . this voice will not be silent within. Many people miss the main appeal that Communism has to some modern minds. The appeal of Communism to intellectuals is not its dialectal materialism. Their interest is not in a bowl of soup but because it is presented as a means of fulfilling human hopes for a better world. Marx called it, "The Force of History." Karl Marx, though an atheist, was still greatly influenced by his Jewish background. It would have been impossible for him not to have been unconsciously influenced as a boy by the great Messianic concepts of the Old Testament concerning a better world wherein dwelleth righteousness. Let me quote a few lines from Whittaker Chambers' book, *"The Witness."* Chambers

was the Senior Editor of the most widely circulated news magazine in our country. He became a Communist, why? Let him answer. "Sooner or later, one of my good friends is sure to ask me: 'How did it happen that a man like you became a Communist?' Each time I wince, not at the personal question, but at their failure to grasp the fact that a man does not, as a rule become a Communist because he is attracted to Communism, but, because he is driven to despair by the crisis of history through which the world is passing." This is the ultimate essence of and goal of Revelation. Irrespective of your eschatology and millennial views, the recurrent theme is of the victory in Christ, the Conqueror of sin, of death and of the grave. He is the beginning and the end, the Eternal One.

The Christian is a *realist*. He sees things as they are. He does not hide from the brutality of beauty of life. He is a realist. The Christian in an *idealist*. He experiences the creative tension" that keeps us striving to do better, be better and make the world more and more as God would have it. The Christian is also an *optimist*. Only the Believer is not locked into his environment and circumstances. We see through and see beyond with confidence and trust in the triumph of truth and the ultimate victory of righteousness through Christ our Lord.

Many years ago George Bernard Shaw, the playwright, and Joseph Fort Newton, the American theologian, attended a post-war victory celebration in one of the large concert halls of London. The evening's program was concluded by a thousand voice choir, backed by a symphony orchestra, singing a hymn that puts our feet on the solid rock of God's assurance in a shaky world. Shaw commented, "I would rather have written that one hymn than all my silly plays." What thrilled him? . . .

" O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Our shelter from the stormy blast,
And our eternal home!

Under the shadow of Thy throne
Thy saints have dwelt secure;
Sufficient is Thine arm alone,
And our defense is sure.

Before the hills in order stood,
Or earth received her frame,
From everlasting Thou art God,
To endless years the same.

O God, our help in ages past,
Our hope for years to come,
Be Thou our guard while life shall last,
And our eternal home."