

CHRIST - THE MESSAGE AND THE MESSENGER

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PART I: CHRIST--THE MESSAGE

Many who read this article are training for Christian service or are actively engaged in that ministry. May I direct your thoughts to this question: What message do I have for a lost world? Is it simple, or complicated? Is it worthy of my sacrifice? Is it effective? Is it able to accomplish the desired results?

I should like to commend to you the simple message of the New Testament. Paul was so sure that he had the right message that he pronounced a curse on anyone who would offer any other (Gal. 1:8). He stated the content of this message very simply: "I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (I Cor. 2:2). This narrows down the message tremendously: it concerns one Person, and one event in that Person's life. Everything else is excluded.

CONTENT OF EARLY PREACHING

Did the apostles actually limit the content of their message to this one theme? Yes, this is what they preached, and this only. At Pentecost Peter lost no time in getting to the heart of his message: "That same Jesus, whom ye have crucified" (Acts 2:36). In the Temple court Peter was still preaching Christ (Acts 3:20). The message of the apostles continued to be a Person: "They ceased not to teach and preach Jesus Christ" (Acts 5:42). In witnessing to the Ethiopian, Philip "began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus" (Acts 8:35). When Paul was converted "straightway he preached Christ" (Acts 9:20). And the same message was offered to the gentiles (Acts 11:20). On the continent of Europe Paul preached a Person, Jesus Christ, at Thessalonica and Athens (Acts 17:3, 18).

This testimony of Luke in the Acts is confirmed in the Epistles. We have quoted I Corinthians 2:2. Later, Paul wrote to the same church: "We preach...Christ Jesus" (II Cor. 4:5). He was so much concerned about getting this message to all men that he even rejoiced when it was preached by unworthy men (Phil. 1:15-18). In all these references, and many others like them, it is Christ himself who is preached.

Now if we are to understand the full force of this testimony we must distinguish between preaching Christ and preaching about Christ. Perhaps an illustration will help us to make that distinction. You are sick. You call the doctor. After examining you thoroughly he takes some pills out of his bag. Then he begins to describe those pills. He mentions their beautiful color, their pleasant taste, their harmlessness. He preaches to you about those pills, and their many virtues. But still you are just as sick as ever. But then the doctor takes some of those pills out of his bottle and gives you one, and you take it. He leaves some more of them for you to take at regular intervals. He prescribes this medicine for you, because he knows it will cure you. All his preach-

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ing about the pills did you no good. But when he preached those pills, prescribed them for you, recommended them as being the answer to your need, then you took them and you were healed. Our message is not a description of Christ, but rather a prescription of Him. The apostles did not preach about Christ; they presented Him as the answer to every human need.

Let us not then suppose that our message is the same as that preached by the apostles simply because we talk much about Christ. Our task is to present Him to the sinner as the remedy for his sin and guilt. We must present Him to the sinning Christian as the cure for his helplessness and defeat. He is our wisdom, our righteousness, our sanctification, our redemption (I Cor. 1:30). Preach Him as the only answer to human need.

EMPHASIS ON ONE EVENT

But now we come to a further restriction as to our message. We have seen that it concerns one Person. But now we must see that it concerns just one event in that Person's life, His death. We already have eliminated everything else and everyone else except Jesus Christ. Now we must shut out all the things that concern Him except His glorious death. For Paul said, "I determined not to know any thing among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (I Cor. 2:2).

But, you may ask, is there not much true Christian wisdom and knowledge which ought to be preached, but which is not about His death? And must we not preach about the signs of the times and His second coming, as well as about His death at His first coming? Let us permit the Apostle Paul to answer these questions: "For the Jews require a sign, and the Greeks seek after wisdom: But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God" (I Cor. 1:22-24). Men may desire to be taught many things. But what they need to be taught is what God accomplished for them at Calvary. This is the Gospel which Paul preached (I Cor. 15:1-3).

If this is the true Christian emphasis, then the message of the Cross must be given top priority. Christ was a great teacher, but many men addressed Him as teacher who missed His salvation. Man already knows more good teaching than he can practice. The high standards of His teaching leave the sinner helpless and hopeless. Jesus was a great miracle-worker. But He is not now engaged in wholesale healing and raising the dead. We cannot say, "I believe," and have our dead again. The Miracle Worker is no longer with us as He was with them. Again, the Lord lived a spotless life, but apart from His Cross I cannot even approach unto His likeness. In the meantime, His purity judges and condemns me. It is true that Christ pleased His Father in everything He did, in living according to God's will, in bringing relief to the suffering, and in teaching His own. But He did not begin to touch basic human needs until He was nailed to the Cross. Everything else was pre-
paratory.

ADEQUACY OF THIS MESSAGE

Having judged all other messages to be inadequate, it is only fair to subject the message of "Christ and him crucified" to examination. Is it adequate? Did God really provide for all human need when He gave His Son to be crucified?

First, for the conscience-stricken sinner, did God provide forgiveness? Isaiah had provided the answer to that question eight centuries before: "But he was wounded for our transgressions,

he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord hath laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Isa. 53:5-6).

Our Lord confirmed that this was the purpose of the Cross at the Last Supper: "Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matt. 26:27-28).

In our personal witnessing, as well as in our public preaching, we need to keep the sinner to the question of his personal relationship to Christ. He may want to talk about Old Testament miracles, or why polygamy and slavery were permitted under the Law, or about David and his sin. The personal worker may have the answer to each of these problems, and may even convince the sinner that he is right. But does the sinner then confess faith in Christ? No, he has a seemingly endless series of problems to introduce. His purpose is to divert the Christian to side issues, and lead him into controversy and argument if possible. By the careful following of this procedure he avoids the pressure and the necessity for a decision.

On the other hand, most of these problems disappear when the will is moved and the sinner receives Christ. So if our desire is to answer the questions and win the soul too, then the proper procedure is to present Christ crucified to the sinner as the answer to his heart need. Keep him on the track--what God has done for him, and what he must do about it. When we concentrate on presenting Christ and Him crucified the sinner is brought face to face with his Saviour and is compelled to make some decision concerning Him. A helpful booklet that follows this method is "Soul-Winning Is Easy," by C.S. Lovett (Christian Supply, Baldwin Park, Cal., 1954). It is easy because it regards the basic need of every sinner as very much alike. He needs Christ, so we present Christ. The older method of soulwinning classifies sinners into scores of categories, and a separate procedure must be learned for each of them. It centers around problems rather than around the One who is the answer to all problems. It is the message of the Cross that is effective in dealing with sinners.

It is relatively easy to show that what the sinner needs is provided by Christ and Him crucified. But when it comes to teaching Christians and meeting their needs, many feel that another message is needed. So we must ask the question: Is the message of Christ and Him crucified adequate for the believer?

Perhaps the sixth chapter of Romans gives the clearest answer to this question. The focal point of the answer is still the Cross. But it is no longer Christ dying for us on that Cross, but our own death with Him. The whole problem of the remaining sin in the Christian's life is dealt with on the basis of his death on the Cross with Christ. Death is separation, and through death the Christian is separated from sin. "Know this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin. For he that is dead is freed from sin" (Rom. 6:6-7). The slavery, the bondage to sin is ended for the believer who appropriates the power of the Cross. So that this Christ-centered message is the only message that breaks the power of sin over the Christian.

The same message of the Cross ultimately will deliver God's people from the presence of sin. Those who will find themselves in heaven, forever separated from sin, will sing, "Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou was slain, and hast redeemed us to God

by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation" (Rev. 5:9). They attribute their happy condition to Christ and Him crucified.

Deliverance from sin's power and presence is only part of what the Christian inherits through Christ and His Cross. Peter tells us that it is through our knowing Christ that God gives us "all things that pertain unto life and godliness" (II Pet. 1:3). In Romans 5 Paul lists many spiritual blessings that are ours in Him. All the blessings of God are ours by virtue of our union with Christ in death, burial, and resurrection. God meets every human need through the message of the Cross.

RELATION TO OTHER THEMES

But some may still hesitate to accept our thesis. For do we not read that the apostles preached a broader message, including other truth besides Jesus Christ and Him crucified? Did not Paul preach "the kingdom of God"? (Acts 28:31). And did not Philip do the same? (Acts 8:12). Paul admonished Timothy to "preach the word" (II Tim. 4:2). And did he not boast that he preached "the whole counsel of God"? (Acts 20:27, ASV). Is there not contradiction here?

No, for there are two radically different ways to preach the whole Bible. First, it may be preached as a collection of facts, history, doctrines, promises, etc. On the other hand, the whole Bible may be preached as a revelation of Jesus Christ and Him crucified. For "the whole counsel of God" for the whole need of man is Christ and His Cross. We maintain that it takes the whole Bible properly to present the meaning of the Cross in all its efficacy. We must study it endlessly to discover all that God accomplished at Calvary; then we must preach it faithfully to apply its healing power to a needy world. The whole redemptive purpose, and program, and revelation of God to man is to be found in Jesus Christ and Him crucified.

This is what Paul states in Ephesians 1:7-10, as translated by Phillips: "It is through the Son, at the cost of his own blood, that we are redeemed, freely forgiven through that full and generous grace which has overflowed into our lives and opened our eyes to the truth. For God has allowed us to know the secret of his plan, and it is this: he purposes in his sovereign will that all human history shall be consummated in Christ, that everything that exists in Heaven or earth shall find its perfection and fulfillment in him." So that there is no message from God to man that is apart from Christ and His Cross.

Simply put, this means that regardless of what portion of Scripture we would preach, we would use that Scripture to present a crucified Saviour. Philip is a splendid example of this: "Then Philip opened his mouth, and began at the same scripture, and preached unto him Jesus" (Acts 8:35). If we know Philip, it would have mattered little to him what portion of the Old Testament the eunuch was reading when he met him, he would have begun at that Scripture and preached unto him Jesus.

If this is our message, then this should be our method. The other characters are there simply to set the stage, to help us to see more clearly the glory of the Cross. What a tragedy it is, then, when we concentrate on the scenery and the background. Instead of preaching the Antichrist, we should use the Antichrist merely to set the stage, then preach Christ his conqueror. Move from the Millennium to the King who will reign. Let the emphasis be not on the second coming of Christ, but on the One who is coming. Preach less on the grace of God, and more on the God of grace. Instead of eulogizing faith, get to the One who is the worthy object of that faith. Concentrate

less on the various gifts of the Spirit, and more on the One who gave the Spirit. Use the whole Bible, present the whole counsel of God, and do so by presenting in all His glorious fullness the world's Redeemer.

This is the way in which the ordinances of the church should be presented, not as something to be argued about, but as a visual aid in presenting the ministry of Christ for men. Whether it is baptism by trine immersion, washing the saints' feet, the love feast, the eucharist, or anointing the sick with oil, all of these are pictures of some aspect of Christ's ministry to human need. Preserve the mode only, and you have only an empty shell. The fact that the eunuch asked Philip for baptism indicates that in preaching Jesus, Philip had used baptism as an illustration of salvation, and what the eunuch had experienced required the right mode of baptism to illustrate it. All the other ordinances may be used in a similar way, as aids in presenting Christ and what He did on the Cross.

Jesus Christ and Him crucified is our message. We must find Him in the experiences of the patriarchs, in the typical sacrifices of the Law, in the history of Israel, in the judgments upon sin, and in the prophecies of the future. Whatever the text, the theme remains the same. And we shall never be in danger of exhausting that Theme.

Finally, what does this message require of the preacher? John Milton Gregory, in his The Seven Laws of Teaching, (Baker Book House, 1954) states the first law as follows: "A teacher must be one who knows the lesson or truth or art to be taught." The preacher must know the lesson to be taught. If he is content to preach facts about Christ, he is ready to preach when he has learned those facts. But if his ministry is to present a Person, then his major objective must be to know that Person. And if he is to present Christ crucified, he must know something of the suffering of the Cross. The Apostle Paul was not satisfied to preach the facts about Christ. That is why he cried out, "That I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death" (Phil. 3:10).

In college and seminary you can learn the facts, and the faculty can teach you and test you. Later, a ministerial examining board can test your knowledge again. But in coming to know Christ and the experience of crucifixion, you are quite on your own. Others can make suggestions and offer encouragement, but you must make your own decision to spend enough time with Christ so that you really know Him. And your own heart must be broken in His presence until you know something of a Calvary experience. If you want to preach like Paul preached, can you say what he said: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me" (Gal. 2:20). If not begin the quest today.

PART II: CHRIST--THE MESSENGER

It should be obvious now that man's greatest need is to come to know God. Otherwise, he has no message for a lost world. But that presents to us another problem: How may man know God? If it is not enough just to know certain facts about Him, but absolutely necessary to know Him personally, we find ourselves searching for a Messenger who can and will make God known to us. Where shall we find Him?

It might seem that some Old Testament passages would contradict these statements. Did not God appear to man on various occasions? There is a twofold answer. First, in every appearance God clothed Himself with the form of a man or an angel. Men did not see God in the fullness of His glory. Second, every manifestation of God was made through the pre-incarnate Christ. It was not the Father who was seen; neither was it the Holy Spirit.

Now, to summarize, up to this point. We have learned that our message is narrowed down to Christ and Him crucified. Now we have learned also that we have only one Messenger who can make God known to man, and He is this same Christ. Man cannot find God. God has not revealed Himself to man through any other Person. As Christ is our only Message, so also is He our only Messenger. It remains but to demonstrate that this self-revelation of God is always made through Christ in all dispensations.

GOD ALWAYS REVEALS HIMSELF THROUGH CHRIST

Already we have mentioned the pre-incarnate appearances of Christ which have been recorded in the Old Testament. Suffice it to cite one example. When God sent an Angel to lead the Children of Israel through the wilderness, that Angel had power to forgive sin, a power that God has never relinquished to a creature. "Behold, I send an Angel before thee, to keep thee in the way, and to bring thee into the place which I have prepared. Beware of him, and obey his voice, provoke him not; for he will not pardon your transgressions: for my name is in him" (Ex. 23:20-21). It was this One, who bore the Name of Jehovah, whose "back parts" Moses saw (Ex. 33:13-23). God made Himself known to Israel through the Christ.

If we can accept these facts concerning the mysterious former dispensation, we shall have no difficulty in seeing Christ as the revelation of God to men during His earthly ministry. "He hath declared (unfolded, revealed, interpreted) him" (John 1:18). Again He claimed: "No man cometh unto the Father, but by me. If ye had known me, ye should have known my Father also: and from henceforth ye know him, and have seen him... He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:6-9). He alone revealed God to men during His earthly ministry.

But our Lord did not complete that revelation of God to men at the time of His ascension. That He continued this work is clearly stated in the Scriptures. Luke begins his record of the beginnings of the Church like this: "The former treatise have I made, O Theophilus, of all that Jesus began both to do and teach, Until the day in which he was taken up..." (Acts 1:1-2). According to the clear inference of this statement, Jesus had only begun His work and teaching at the time of His ascension. He continued to work miracles and to teach men about God on a broader scale than was possible while He was still limited by His human body.

Our Lord himself confirmed His intention to continue His ministry when He prayed for His disciples: "I have declared unto them thy name, and will declare it" (John 17:26). He did not plan to finish His revelation of God within the next few hours. Rather, it was to be a continuing ministry.

The disciples were fully aware of this fact; consequently, they consistently attributed to Him all that was accomplished thereafter. This is how Peter explains the miracles of Pentecost: "This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses. Therefore being by the right hand of God

Finally, we would take a look into the future. For the same Christ who has revealed God to men in past and present dispensations will continue this work in the future and in eternity. He will still be God's Messenger to men, showing us the Father, in eternity to come.

At the Second Coming of Christ, "We know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is" (I John 3:2). The One we shall see is the One who is coming again.

In the first chapter of Revelation John saw the glorified Christ. In the eighth verse one might assume that it is the Father who is described: "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the ending, saith the Lord, which is, and which was, and which is to come, the Almighty." But this same Person speaks in verse 18: "I am he that liveth, and was dead." This makes it clear that the One who is seen is Christ, not the Father, for the Father was never dead.

In Revelation 21:3 one might suppose that the God who will dwell with men is the Father. But in verse 6 He is identified as "Alpha and Omega," who is the Christ in chapter 1.

In Revelation 22:4 it is said, "They shall see his face." Whose face? In verse 7 He is identified as the coming One, the Lord Jesus Christ. In each of these cases it is evident that in all the future we shall know God only as He is revealed in Jesus Christ. He is the One, sent by the Father, to make contact with sinful man and to bring him back into the Father's fellowship.

Herein lies the urgency of our ministry. "For there is one God, and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (I Tim. 2:5). Of the three Persons in the Godhead, only the Son became man, so as to bridge the gulf between God and men.

"Who gave himself a ransom for all" (I Tim. 2:6). That is Christ and Him crucified, our Message.

"To be testified in due time." That is our ministry--testimony. Christ himself is the Messenger.

"Whereunto I am ordained a preacher" (I Tim. 2:7). Thank God! It is the greatest work in the world.

"I will therefore that men pray every where, lifting up holy hands, without wrath and doubting" (I Tim. 2:8).