

The Christianity of Christ

by Charles S. Medbury

The sermon emphasizes the universal, ethical, and practical nature of the Christianity of Christ, and its power to bring unity and transformation to individuals and the world.

Scripture: Matthew 28:19, Romans 1:16, 1 Corinthians 1:18, Galatians 6:9, James 1:27, 1 Peter 4:10

Topics: "Christian Living", "Evangelism"

Description

Charles S. Medbury delivers a powerful sermon emphasizing the importance of focusing on God's work rather than individual personalities. He reflects on historical moments where Christlike men, inspired by the unity and love of Jesus, spread messages of love despite adversity. Medbury highlights the commitment to a 'pure gospel ministry' and the need to supply the poor with Scriptures, echoing the essence of modern missionary efforts. He calls for a renewed dedication to the universal, ethical, and practical message of Christ, urging for a new crusade of evangelism and service to redeem a world in need.

Transcript

Carnegie Hall, Thursday Morning, October 14.

This moment means far too much to have any man's personality obtrude itself upon the people's thought. The work of our God has the right of way.

And yet who can stand where centuries meet and be unmoved as to human relationships? God works through men, and when we think of him and his, we can but think of those whom he has used and of others whom he is calling to his service. And as I stand here to-day, by your lovingkindness which I may not even attempt to acknowledge, at this crowning hour of history and promise, my heart is moved to depths where language fails.

The "Declaration and Address" of 1809 was wrought out in the spirit of the prayer of our Lord. In an upper room at Jerusalem, or in the pathway from that room to garden agony, the Son of God cried out for the unity of his people, to the end that the world might believe. Reviled, he reviled not in return, and in an atmosphere of bitterness he alone was kind.

So in days of sacred memory to us in this Convention, Christlike men

C. S. MEDBURY.

turned aside to an upper-room experience, in the very neighborhood of our assembly here to-day, and, forgetful of scorn and maltreatment, came forth with a message of love to the unloving.

Look with me for a moment to things of ultimate conquest to which the "Declaration and Address" was committed. First, there is the pledged support of "a [173] pure gospel ministry," which was not a located, but an evangelistic ministry. Those subscribing funds under this first call were engaged in the realm of home missionary activity. Again, there is special provision for "supplying the poor with the Holy Scriptures," which thought links perfectly with the mind of the Master and with the shaping of the modern missionary propaganda. Again, there is the voice of sorrow as to "large settlements and tracts of country" which were "entirely destitute of a gospel ministry." What is this but the home missions of our day in the life of men of the past? And still again, there is an appeal that will yet find the heart of the religious world. It is so noble God will provide for it a hearing. Such words may not fall to the ground. Give heed to the great soul of Thomas Campbell as he exclaims: "Our dear brethren, of all denominations, will please to consider that we have our educational prejudices and particular customs to struggle against as well as they. But this we do sincerely declare, that there is nothing we have hitherto received as a matter of faith or practice, which is not expressly taught and enjoined in the word of God, either in express terms or approved precedent, that we would not heartily relinquish that we might return to the original constitutional unity of the Christian church; and in this happy unity enjoy full communion with all our brethren in peace and charity." What word is this a hundred years beyond its time! What spirit is this challenging our own! And what the sublime purpose of this unity for which this man of old pleads! Oh, my friends, the motives of heaven are here! Listen as he continues: "The like dutiful condescension we candidly expect of all that are seriously impressed with a sense of the duty they owe to God, to each other, and to their perishing brethren of mankind." Duties to God, duties to one another, and duties to perishing brethren of mankind! What more can be asked? It is a view of the Christianity of Christ.

Years pass--it is the record from 1809 to 1849--and the "pure gospel ministry" brings into the fold of Christ a great company of the loyal subjects of his will. But these men and women of common faith and purpose are widely scattered and the need of some general organization is apparent. Individual congregations realize that they can not even attempt, alone, what would be of easy accomplishment in co-operation with others.

The cry was for "some more digested system of bringing all energies to bear upon the church and the world." "We have gone through the war period battling for life and existence," some exclaimed; "now we must turn our attention to the more difficult, but most vital, questions of permanent organization for lasting existence and strong action in our life and mission as representatives of apostolic Christianity." "We want organization," wrote Mr. Campbell himself--"the setting in order of the things that are wanting to perfect the church and convert the world."

In line with such thought and agitation, our first Convention was called for Cincinnati, O., October, 1849. One hundred and fifty-six delegates enrolled, representing over one hundred congregations in eleven States. Charles Louis Loos declares that "the chief object of the Convention was the organization of a general world-embracing missionary enterprise." "On this," he says, "all eyes were fixed, and when it was accomplished all hearts were filled with joy."

Great souls were in the ranks of this gathering of sixty years ago. They walked with God. It should force us to our knees this glad, triumphant day, to note the spirit in which their work was done. In an opening session of the Convention of 1849, William Morton introduced the following resolution:

"Resolved, unanimously, That it is the duty and privilege of every member of this Convention, in entering upon the duties devolving upon him, to do so with the love of God in his heart, the fear of God before his mind, and with an eye single to His glory and the good of man, and that every personal and party feeling of pride, selfishness and worldly ambition be wholly laid aside."

To this may be added the word of W. K. Pendleton in his report to the Millennial Harbinger, when he says that the deep earnestness which pervaded the assembly showed that "it was [174] regarded as a solemn convocation on the great and sublime concerns of the Christian kingdom."

We have come to the birthday of our missionary activity. We are committed, as a people, to the spread of the gospel in destitute places of our own and foreign lands. Alexander Campbell is the first president of the American Christian Missionary Society, but because of his absence by reason of illness, D. S. Burnett is in the chair. The spirit of the "Declaration and Address" has wrought itself into the fiber of a people called of God to distinctive service. In closer co-operation the churches are going to provide the support for that "pure gospel ministry" which is to carry tidings of the Lord to "large settlements and tracts of country" which are still "entirely destitute" of the saving ministry of the Word of life. It is recognized even more generally and clearly than forty years before that the word of God knows no narrower play of love than the world of God! Those professing loyalty to the one are bound to the service of the other.

Further years pass--'tis the era from 1849 to the present time--and a great brotherhood is budded upon the foundation well laid. The call to the word of God, involving loyalty in both doctrine and life, is made insistently. Results in evangelism rejoice all hearts and are widely noted; basic educational interests are pressed forward and a missionary program adopted, taking into loving account every creature of every land. The faithful few of 1809 have become a mighty host. The disorganized or unorganized forces of 1849 have become an army. The tread of more than a million is heard in the land, and the confident voice of leaders speaks of coming victories for Christ. It is mine, in honoring the pioneers, to speak of a splendid character superstructure to be reared upon the foundation they laid. It is mine, in paying tribute to men to have them obscured by the person of Christ before whom they prostrated themselves in fervent love and in proffers of tireless service. It is His face alone we seek in this Centennial day. His word alone is law. The men of 1809 and 1849 and 1909 are one in this to the very core of being, that love and honor shall be granted every worthy life, but right to rule to none but Christ!

What vantage-ground is ours over those whose duty it was but to blaze the way? How much more we know of truth's power than they! We walk by sight where faith alone made the way for them. Nations are to large degree Christian now, whose doors were then closed. Within our own land polygamy is outlawed, slavery is gone, public lotteries are gone and the death-knell of the legalized liquor traffic has been sounded. And in realm religious, the bitterness they knew has marvelously yielded. Endeavor and Bible-school organizations, Young Men's and Young Women's Christian Associations, union temperance, benevolent, philanthropic, reform, evangelistic and missionary movements, then unheard of, and absolutely impossible under the existing conditions, are now of every day.

The age of fighting among the professed followers of Christ has gone. It yielded to the age of toleration, which, in turn, yielded to the present era of good fellowship, and now devout minds everywhere are hoping and planning for the further step of unity for which the Master prayed. How much credit is due the men who have spent a century in effort to build again on foundations laid of God, we may not know. Only let us rejoice in victories granted and praise God whose word has indeed not returned unto him void.

A sacred past of loyalty to God's word and work salutes a splendid present, and the present points to even greater days. Faith cries, "God is in his heaven and all's well with the world." "Giants" and "walled cities" of opposition carry no terror to the heart, for the triumphs of a hundred years ago give positive assurance that the Christianity of Christ is force invincible. We need nothing better. We need nothing else. Our day is not so peculiar that the Infinite could not or did not provide for it. It is not so advanced that it needs a new gospel. Its wisdom is still foolishness by the side of the thoughts of God. Let us look to the message we are to proclaim, in the light of the long ages. Has it ever failed in North or South or East or [175] West of any land? Are there wounds it can not heal? Are there tears it can not stay? Are there walls it can not build? Are there wrongs it can not right? Let us turn to the analysis to see if the message stands the test.

I. The Gospel of Christ is a Universal Message.

The Christian Scriptures assume to speak for all men and all time. There is no hint of the temporary or of territorial boundaries. First prophecies foretold blessings for "all nations." Jesus was to be "the light to lighten the Gentiles and the glory of his people Israel." The commission that later fell from his own lips embraced the world and its "every creature." Paul's apostleship was "unto the obedience of faith among all the nations." Everything indicates the reach to all needs of all men of all lands of all time! And how this assumption of the Scriptures is borne out in the unfoldings of history! Gospel heralds go to every section of the then known world. Impressions for God are made in cities of every type. Priest-craft yields at Jerusalem, idolatry owns a greater than Diana at Ephesus, culture bows to a "babblers'" message at Athens, zeal for gold gives way to zeal for God in Corinth, and, as Gibbon puts it, "a pure and humble religion" finally erects "the triumphant banners of the cross on the ruins of the capitol at Rome." The message has power everywhere. Jew and Gentile, bond and free, male and female yield to the claims of the Son of God. The message is no respecter of persons. Learned and unlearned, high and low, are won alike from the ranks of the lost. A great leader pleads for a king, but from the same heart writes a letter to protect a slave. The heart of God cries to every man, and from every realm there comes response of faith given unto martyrdom.

Men living in caves of snow and ice in the distant regions of the North, men of the tropics, men of the great nations of darkness of the far East and of the islands of the sea, men of all languages, all customs, all beliefs, with every possible hindrance to faith in God and whose conversion seems miraculous, have yet all yielded to the universal language of the loving heart of God.

And within the home land the record has been the same. The gospel message has had power at Ellis Island--the nation's gateway to the alien. It has cleansed and purified and beautified the cabins of the South, and from these cabins brought forth men to places of spiritual eminence. It has discovered glorious manhood in the hut of mountaineer, and, throwing back the flaps of Indian tents, the herald of the cross has found life responsive there. In the slums of great cities, where the worldly wise laughed at effort, the lost have been redeemed. And behind prison walls men have yielded to the truth that makes us free. But not alone in the ranks of the untaught, the unfortunate or the depraved has the story of the risen Christ won its way. The greatest minds of earth have bowed before the Nazarene. The kingdoms of this world--kingdoms of intelligence, kingdoms of wealth, kingdoms of human ideals--are becoming more and more the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ.

If the gospel, declared in the hampered speech of our divisions of the past, has wrought out these mighty, mighty things in every land and every realm, and given us our present Christian civilization, where are the limits of the power of that "pure gospel ministry" for which men plead a hundred years ago and which has

had but happy introduction to the life of the religious world? Men and brethren, there are no limits! It is the message that will usher in the glad day of world conquest when all the people of God speak the same thing. It is the message that will steady and satisfy the great host of those who have broken with lines of human teaching, but have not as yet found rest in Christ alone. It is the message for those who have been led to overemphasize some one phase of truth at the expense of truth itself. It is the message for the wayfaring man, pressed with many burdens, but wanting to know the way home. It is the message for the scholar, for it bids him dig and delve where he will, restraining only in the realm of theory, speculation and tentative conclusions, but welcoming ever in the domain of fact. It is the message universal as to both [176] men and needs. It is the message of God, and with that saying all is said.

II. The Gospel of Christ is an Ethical Message.

If it is true that nothing less than a universal message will satisfy the demands of a final religion, it is surely also true that that message, in loftiest sense, must be an ethical religion. This thought is in emphasis to-day. Strangely enough, however, the thought of an ethical religion suggests, to some minds, departure from the Christianity of Christ. Men use the phrase "an ethical revival" with strong intimations of the rejection of our Lord and the repudiation of the church purchased with his blood, as though such a thing as an ethical revival were possible apart from him whose precious teachings constitute the basis of every system of ethics in any way deserving the name. It is the contention of this hour, and I believe it should be the word of this great Convention to the world, that the gospel itself is in every sense an exalted ethical message, and that what is needed now is not the new pronouncement of any man or men as to desirable lines of human conduct, but, rather, the reproclaiming and the appropriation to ourselves of the unerring standards of human life laid down by Him of whom the voice from heaven said, "Hear ye him."

The church of our Lord stands for an ethical revival. It welcomes the life calls of the gospel. It recognizes the fact that in the creedal discussions of the ages there has been an overemphasis of doctrine and an underemphasis of deeds. It welcomes the tone and temper of the religious life of our day, but instead of thinking of this as the contribution of our day to Christianity, it regards the present atmosphere of better things as the contribution of Christianity to our day! The emphasis upon the ethical is the one to-be-expected thing. Devout men, bending low over the word of God, have long expected it. And now that it has come, why not crown Him whose holy precepts are back of every worthy life, the prompting of all unselfishness, the inspiration of all sacrifice?

The ethical revival of now is the flower and fruit of the days of our Lord. In a last sacred hour he provided that the people should be taught all the things which he had commanded his apostles. And in their glorious ministry, inspired apostles laid these sacred injunctions upon the hearts of all. Men were exhorted to present their bodies a living sacrifice; they were to seek the things that are above; they were to put away all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and railing and were to be kind to one another, tender-hearted, forgiving each other; they were to minister to every need and their love was to know no narrower bounds than the utmost habitations of men. Surely here are ethical standards unsurpassed, yea, unequalled, by any modern pronouncements. I am glad to incorporate a quotation from Alexander Campbell. "The life approved of God," he says, "allows not a single inimical or unfriendly feeling toward any human being; no selfish emulation, strife or vainglory; but cherishes the kindest wishes and the most benevolent desires for the health, wealth and prosperity of every one, and suffers not envy, jealousy, revenge or any kindred feeling to have an abiding within it."

In these quotations from the word of God, and in this heart-cry from a man of our own earlier work, surely we may learn that in our day men are not calling to higher levels than were fixed of God in Jesus' day. With him, then, and within his church, let us work out heaven's plans. Let no false generosity or charity lead us to yield where he has bound, for there can be no final unity of the people of God except with Christ as the center and his word the final word.

III. The Gospel of Christ is a Practical Message.

As men of our day would not concede for a moment that the message of a final religion could be less than a universal message, and as the higher thought to which we are coming in the good providence of God demands the emphasis upon things of ethical domain, so does the world of our day, in its heartache and need because of sin, insist upon a practical message and a practical ministry dealing with the actual problems of men. [177]

But here again we find that he with whom we have to do has anticipated us. And as we find him thus, still leading on, still in advance, blazing pathways for our laggard feet, we cry out with a new reverence, "My Lord and my God." Everything of human wisdom is shamed before him. His plans are infinitely better than our own.

The message of Christ is practical because it is upon character levels. He sounds the depths. He works in the realm of conviction. He transforms men. His work abides. By his victories he absolutely silences the scoffer, for the man who is healed stands by. As of the scene on Galilee one has said, "The wind arose and there was a great storm; he arose and there was a great calm," so in the places where human discord threatens now his presence speaks peace. And it is the demonstration of a power like this that moves the hearts of men.

The message of Jesus is a practical message because of its simplicity. It is within the grasp of the humblest child of earth. There links with our praise in this great Centennial Convention a chorus of thanksgiving voiced by humble lives of every nation of the earth. Not the wisdom of men has won them to the common standard of the cross, but a message from heaven as clear and plain as the love of God is strong and true. Here are lives absolutely made over by the power of God, in whose presence and by whose labors of faith and love the discipleship of our own enlightened lands is often humbled.

Again, the message of Christ is a practical message because it carries hope and cheer to humankind. Sad hearts are all about us. The story of Christ gives joy. Men are in the darkness. Jesus is the light. Multitudes are bowed down in weakness. He of whom we speak giveth strength. Without the Christ, and the cross that speaks of his sacrifice of love, the meaning of ministry dies. With the Christ and the story of the cross, there is no place of need so great that the herald of the King may not enter with the feeling that he has abundant supply from the bounty of God for every craving of every human heart.

Such, my friends, is the gospel of the Son of God, the need of America and of the world to-day. I have brought no new message. In the morning dawn of the second century of our people's history I am pleading for that "pure gospel ministry" which was in the mind of those who gave our history its beginning. But I do not plead for this because of men whom I revere. In my thought this day I see no man save Jesus only. But I plead with all the strength of my life for this continued heralding of the simple gospel of our Christ because it seems to me that the glorious record of the days ago places the stamp of divine approval upon this ministry. I know not where to turn for another universal message. I know not where to turn for another message of so exalted ethical type. I know not where to turn for a message bearing so practically

upon the affairs of the life of our day. It seems to me that I have turned to the heart of the living God for this message. If that is true, my words need no defense.

I wish it were within my power to sound this morning the call of a new crusade. I wish we might become so lost in one sublime purpose that the world looking to us as a people might be moved to depths as yet unsounded. If only loyalty to the word of our God and the Christ of the Scriptures, and a spirit like the Master's own, and a passion for souls such as characterized him, could dominate us, happy would we be and blessed the world because of us. I have no ambition for our people's place, but I do long for them to have power for God among men.

The eyes of all are upon us. God has brought us to a mount of opportunity. In the day of a babel of cries in the religious world, "Lo here, and lo there," it is ours to sound a clear note. It will be our shame if numbers are the most impressive thing about this Convention. It will be keenly disappointing to both earth and heaven if the world sees here but a review of veterans within a party's fellowship. But if the world sees a people happy indeed in the life of their great men, but happy because of the contribution these men have made to the enrichment of all human life, and notes a spirit of devotion to [178] God and his word and his work that sets everything else aside, then there will be grounds for joy. And if the multitudes away from Christ can be made to feel that here is a mighty concourse of men and women whose motives are heaven-born--men and women who actually care for the tempted, tired, tried, buffeted and sin-sick sons and daughters of men--then will be gladness both in heaven and in earth. May we be prostrate before heaven these days, learning better how to declare the spirit that is in us.

To-day the Son of God appeals. He points to our own nation in its beauty and glory of situation and bids us redeem it for God. He tells of great cities where life is literally crushed out by the pressure of unnatural and abnormal conditions. He tells us of the greed and graft of men who deny comfort in places of work and health in their homes to other men. He tells of social sins--the baneful white slave traffic eating at a nation's vitals, corruption in so-called polite circles, the remaining curse of the legalized saloon--and of multitudes within even fair America that know not the sound of his voice. And then he weeps again, strong Son of God, as he tells of intelligent, cultured millions, who claim enlistment in his cause, but are yet unconcerned, in happy freedom, while other millions die! He does not forget the faithful in fields of strength or loyalty in fields of struggle. He is gladdened by the better gifts each year brings, but the world is dying, and if this generation does not redeem this generation, it will not be redeemed at all, and the Master who died that men might live can but plead for the unconsecrated resources of his people to meet his people's need!

He bids us "Go," and the word points to a persistent rural evangelism that will give back to the country its safeguards for the young. It points to great campaigns in cities, conducted in such reverence toward God and in such dependence upon the power of truth itself, as to swing into line for service in building a city of God the might of intelligence, influence and worthy wealth that builds a city of men--thus gaining God's forces for God. It points to State movements of evangelism, big enough and great enough and of power enough to command the press of commonwealths and bring to the attention of even the most indifferent the vital things of a man's relationship to God. It points to sober work of great souls in hopeless homes of the poor, in godless homes of the rich, in hospitals, asylums and orphanages, in shops and factories, in opera-houses, and upon the streets. It points to the consecration of the highest talents of the greatest men to what the world counts lowliest tasks--a breaking with the conventional under the terrific stress of a mission bearing on eternity. It points to the teaching of men wherever found--the earnest, manly challenging of misconceptions and the loving of a race back to God! It points to homes cleansed from

social impurities, social wastes, and a thousand little nothings that should not consume the strength and time and means of the professed servants of the Lord. It points to the evangelism of life that pleads the whole year round for honor to Christ, crowning the regular ministry with the joy of greeting the redeemed and giving congregations the sense of strength that comes from growth when the Lord is adding day by day to the subjects of his will. It points to a new note of expectancy in the regular ministry, and to a new note of patience with men in field evangelism, giving the truth of God time to do its transforming work. It points to preachers of prophetic type, who, like John, are "voices," because the whole man is a sermon, and it points to a people who, in gifts of farms and stocks and bonds and houses and lands, catching the spirit of the new crusade, and hearing the groans of the home land, are crying out, "God wills it," for America's redemption.

I stop a moment in this strange hour, waiting resolve before God! For myself, I extend one hand to those who have gone before, and praise God for them in the blessings they have brought the world. And then I turn to young men of our ministry and pledge them to simple loyalty. It is the passing on of trust in God from first to second century--the setting of the seal of all the days upon the Christianity of Christ. [179] And as I stand, the awed, unworthy spokesman of the years, I seem to hear the past declaring, "This is the victory that overcometh the world," and like response in anthem of praise the future answers, "Even our faith."

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