

THE MEANS OF SELF-RENEWAL

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on September 17, 1967, at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

Anyone who is even casually interested in sporting events has become more and more aware that the mighty New York Yankees of other years have fallen into serious decline. Yesterday's newspaper, I believe, indicated that they are in eighth place in their league, eighteen games behind the leaders. I remember as a child how I used to thrill at their great prowess. The names of their players were on the lips of thousands of little boys throughout the land. There was a long period of time in which they were so great that they almost ruined the league in which they played. Those days are gone.

When we drive into the heart of our city, we are aware of old houses that once were grand in their appearance, the homes of the elite, but which now are cheap rooming houses, or maybe even slums. Time has changed them from their great prestigious position to eyesores in the community. Some of the great nations of the world which a few years ago had tremendous influence and power are now only a shadow on the edge of world influence. What I am saying is simply that life goes in cycles and greatness is inevitably followed by decline. Strength is inevitably followed by weakness. Often there isn't much time between the pinnacle of success and the valley of disappointment. A great family of one generation may not be a great family in the next generation. We live in a world where dissolution is all about us. Those who are most successful within a few years will know disappointment and failure. So in our world there is a constant need for renewal, for restoration, for some kind of rebuilding, for some kind of beginning again.

In the Realm of Religion

This recurring need for renewal has also been seen in the realm of religion. God's people demonstrate again and again that a generation of loyal obedience to God is often followed by a generation which ignores God. A right relationship to Jehovah was difficult to sustain for more than a brief period of time. One of the classic examples of the decline of religious concern on the part of Judah occurred during the period after the northern kingdom of Israel had been taken into captivity. The people had become idolatrous in their worship and the true worship of Jehovah at the temple was sorely neglected. It was at this stage in 638 B.C. that the eight year old king, Josiah, came to the throne. Although he began certain reforms in his late teens or early twenties, it was when he was twenty-six years of age that he commanded the workmen to clean and repair the temple. In the process they found a copy of the Law of Moses. The workmen immediately brought it to the king. When he had read the law Josiah was deeply concerned that true worship be restored. He called the people to assemble and listen as the law was read. They too were concerned and as a result the temple worship was reinstated. For the first time in many years the Passover feast was kept as it had been kept originally.

I have chosen this particular example, because it demonstrates so very clearly the means by which renewal or restoration of a right relationship to God must come. God's written word provides the means or the machinery for self-renewal. The Bible is a self-correcting device. When man has drifted away from

the pattern, a reading of God's inspired word leads him to see the true standard and encourages him to come back to the right way. In his infinite wisdom God has provided in the scriptures a mechanism by which wayward mankind can come back to the old paths.

Warnings From The Apostles

During the time that the Lord and the apostles were upon the earth warnings against falling away were issued. The danger of apostasy was very real and while the inspired writers could not possibly have known how great the dangers were nor how long their warnings would be read by future generations of Christians, we can see God's wisdom in making preparations for the human tendency to apostatize. Among these passages is Acts 20:28-30, in which the apostle Paul warned the elders of the church at Ephesus: "Take heed unto yourselves, and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit hath made you bishops, to feed the church of the Lord, which he purchased with his own blood. I know that after my departing grievous wolves shall enter in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them."

To the Galatians Paul wrote, "I marvel that ye are so quickly removing from him that called you in the grace of Christ unto a different gospel; which is not another gospel: only there are some that trouble you, and would pervert the gospel of Christ. But though we, are an angel from heaven, should preach unto you any gospel other than that which we preached unto you, let him be anathema. As we have said before, so say I now again, If any man preacheth unto you any gospel other than that which ye received, let him be anathema." (Galatians 1:6-9*)

To Timothy Paul warned, "But the spirit saith expressly, that in later times some shall fall away from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits and doctrines of demons, through the hypocrisy of men that speak lies, branded in their own conscience as with a hot iron." (I Timothy 4:1-2) In II Peter 2:1, we read further, "But there arose false prophets also among the people, as among you also there shall be false teachers, who shall privily bring in destructive heresies, denying even the Master that bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction." Even the beloved disciple John warned, "Beloved, believe not every spirit, but prove the spirits, whether they are of God; because many false prophets are gone out in the world." (I John 4:1) In II John 9 he said further, "Whoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God: He that abideth in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and the Son." However, in spite of these warnings the departures came. It was not long before the early church had been led away from the original pattern into an ever increasing apostasy. In both life and doctrine there was a falling away, a watering down, a weakening of Christianity.

Reformation and Restoration

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries there came the great Reformation, led by Martin Luther and others. It grew out of a rediscovery of the scriptures. It was an effort to return to the purity of the original church. Although great progress was made, it was not long until the Reformation was followed by another decline and another series of departures. Many different churches arose. Many new doctrines sprang up.

Then came the Restoration Movement. One historian indicated that the following situation prevailed at the beginning of the Nineteenth century:

"(1) There was a dissatisfaction with human creeds and religious strife which resulted in the dividing of the religious world into many churches. (2) The Calvinistic doctrine of total depravity and the mystical conceptions of salvation were hindering Christianity. (3) There was a general neglect of the Bible. (4) There was a religious stagnation and a decadence of morals."

The Restoration Movement was a plea for the unity of all believers in Christ on the basis of the New Testament, for the purpose of the restoration of New Testament Christianity. The objective was Christian unity. The basis was the New Testament. The method was restoration. These men who desired to restore primitive Christianity used some very effective slogans. Among them was the expression, "Where the scriptures speak, we speak; where the scriptures are silent, we are silent." Another was "Let us have a 'thus saith the Lord' for everything that we do in faith and practice." Still another that was often heard was simply the phrase "Back to the Bible."

Leaders of the Restoration

The study of restoration history mentions a great many men of strong faith and great courage. James O'Kelly, for example, was an early preacher in Virginia and North Carolina. He was a leading influence in one of the largest denominations of his day. He went to the Baltimore conference of his church in 1793 and openly declared to the assembly that he could not find in the Bible many of the things that he had promised to preach when he was ordained. He called for others to join with him in leaving the creed and taking the Bible as the only guide. This was in 1793 and history indicates that some 7,000 communicants followed him back toward the Bible and toward the Bible and toward New Testament Christianity.

Abner Jones and Elias Smith were circuit-riding preachers in New England. Disturbed about "sectarian names and creeds," they led a dozen small congregations in rural areas to be "Christians only." This was in the year 1802. In 1804 in frontier Kentucky Barton W. Stone from a third religious background led a movement back to the New Testament. He also was disturbed about religious division and along with a number of other preachers of his religious group declared "the Bible is the only true guide to heaven."

In 1809 Thomas Campbell issued his famous Declaration and Address in which he said, "Nothing ought to be admitted, as of divine obligation, in the constitution and management of the church, but what is expressly enjoined by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ and His apostles upon the New Testament church, either in express terms or by approved precedent.....Nothing ought to be received into the faith or worship of the church, or be made a term of communion among Christians, that is not as old as the New Testament."

Constant Need for Renewal

In the Old Testament in the book of Jeremiah there is this meaningful statement, "Thus saith Jehovah, Stand ye in the ways and see, and ask for the old paths, where is the good way: and walk therein, and ye shall find rest for your souls." (Jeremiah 6:16) Throughout the history of man there has been a recurring need to return to the old paths. This has been especially true in the history of God's people. Over and over again there has been a drift away from God's way and a need to return to the old paths.

In our day areas in which we need a restoration include: (1) Matters of doctrine. Since man has ignored the Lord's instructions about how to become a Christian and since man has provided so many alternative suggestions, it is impera-

tive that we go back to the New Testament and emphasize the God-given way. The gospel of Christ must first be preached; man must believe that Christ is the son of God. On the basis of his faith he is led to repent of his sins, to confess the name of Christ before men, and to be baptized for the remission of his sins. This is the repeated pattern of conversion one finds in the book of Acts. Then, there is the matter of worship. The original five avenues of worship--prayer, singing, eating the Lord's Supper, giving of one's means, and listening to the teachings of the Lord--are still binding upon Christians. The organization of the church also needs to follow the New Testament pattern. Elders to rule, evangelists to preach, deacons to serve, teachers to teach, and all Christians to share in the Lord's work is the pattern of the scriptures.

(2) Christian living. The need of restoration includes the whole manner in which Christians live. It is so easy in a wicked world unconsciously to absorb the attitudes and behavior of those who do not profess to be Christians. The Lord's high standard of purity of ethics and morals must be re-established. This includes the Lord's teaching on marriage, divorce and remarriage. It has to do with all phases of the way people live in society. This is an area demanding serious renewal, because the centuries have eroded away much of the pattern of Christian behavior.

(3) Concern for those in need. Still another area needing restoration is that of concern for those in need: the hungry, the naked, the sick, those in prison, and those in distress of any kind.

(4) Concern for the lost. Finally, the need for renewal demands that all Christians feel a deepened and expanded concern for the millions of lost souls throughout the world. No responsibility of the Christian is heavier than that of bringing the gospel message to the three and one quarter billion people who now live on the earth.

Conclusion

In our day the church is often severely criticized. Some of these criticisms come from those whose lives are obviously out of step with their Master. Other of the criticisms come from keen-minded young men who feel that the church is failing to discharge its responsibilities in the modern world. From whatever quarter they may come, criticism of the church needs seriously to be considered. Sometimes the church is grossly misjudged and seriously maligned. Sometimes the motives of those who criticize are to be questioned. However, the church ought always to be more than ready to examine its doctrines and its practices in the light of God's inspired record. The church needs a deeper dedication to Christ and a more active pursuit of the goals which Christ put before his disciples; it needs to be cleansed and strengthened. No one claims that the church, made up of earthen vessels, is without flaw. Through the centuries the mirror of God's word has needed to be held before the church that it may see itself in the light of God's instructions. In our day we who profess to be Christians must be ready to examine ourselves in the light of the scriptures as we must ultimately be examined by the Lord.

This is not to say that the church is not praiseworthy in many ways. Many Christians and many congregations under the severest examination would compare well with the Christians of the first century.

Finally, it is our responsibility in every age to spend the time and effort necessary to know God's word. This means private Bible study and public instruction in the scriptures. Then, when one is absolutely sure that he knows God's will, it is imperative that he have the strength and determination to live as God wants him to live. As long as there is a Bible in the world, and as long as there are people who will read and heed the teachings of the Bible, we can be confident that there will be those who walk in the old paths and are pleasing to God. This is God's means for our renewal.