

EVANGELISM--"I AM THE WAY"

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on March 31, 1968 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

The final paragraph of the ninth chapter of Matthew speaks of our Lord in these words, "And Jesus went about all the cities and the villages, teaching in their synagogues, and preaching the gospel of the kingdom, and healing all manner of disease and all manner of sickness. But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion for them, because they were distressed and scattered, as sheep not having a shepherd. Then saith he unto his disciples, The harvest indeed is plenteous, but the laborers are few, Pray ye therefore the lord of the harvest, that he send forth laborers into his harvest." (Matt. 9:35-38).

Throughout the entire gospel of Matthew we feel the never-ending emphasis of the New Testament upon evangelism. In almost every chapter, on almost every page of the written scriptures, we find a strong, recurring emphasis on the importance of telling mankind about Christ and salvation. It is the theme of the entire New Testament. In Matthew, this theme comes to its climax in the final verses of the final chapter as Christ gives his great commission to his faithful apostles, "Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I commanded you: and lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world." (Matt. 28:19-20). These were the marching orders for the apostles, and, through them, are the marching orders for all Christians of all time.

Unusual Facts

As I have studied the theme of evangelism, as presented in the New Testament and as manifest in the world about us, I have come to the conclusion that there are a number of strange facts connected with it. First, for example, there is the fact that people who need the gospel often do not want it. In contrast we discover that people who are in need of clothing, or food, or any of the other basic material necessities of life are eager to receive them. How strange it is that people who need salvation, a far more pressing necessity than the need for food or clothing or shelter, do not seem to want salvation. We discover that there is often a wall of resistance between the one who would teach the way of salvation and the one who desperately needs to learn it in order to be saved. This wall of resistance sometimes is so heavy that it cannot be broken or removed.

A second fact suggests that the people who carry the gospel are often suspect. The apostle Paul was resisted and persecuted, for no crime except that he was trying to bring men to Christ and salvation. Then and now the evangelists' motives are often questioned. Sometimes overtly, and sometimes only by implication, people ask, "What are you going to get out of it?" "What's your angle?" "What brought you all this distance to talk to me?"

Still another fact is that the people who carry the gospel must pay the expenses. In the New Testament we find the apostle Paul preaching in the city of Corinth, while being supported by congregations back along his journey such as the church at Philippi, Thessalonica, and elsewhere. Sometimes when their contributions failed to come he was forced to make tents in order to preach. Never, it seems, did those to whom he was preaching bear the expenses of their own conversion. Today, also, we find that those to whom we preach cannot be expected to bear the cost of the efforts put forth in their conversion.

Yet again, it is a strange fact that the carrying of the gospel is one of the hardest kinds of work in all the world. It is a battle not only for men's minds, but also for their supreme loyalties. Those who seek to persuade a man to buy some electrical appliance, or a set of books, or even an automobile, or a house, are asking only for a relatively small portion of the person's income. They are asking for a few dollars or a few hours of work. On the other hand, the Christian who seeks to bring others to Christ is asking for a complete change in the direction of one's life. It involves a change of the basic allegiance of one's heart, a change in ultimate values, a change in life goals. For this reason it is a task of great magnitude requiring great skill and great perseverance. It is not easy to bring men to Christ.

Finally, we would note that the people who go with the gospel often become more deeply involved and have heavier responsibilities than if they had not gone. Instead of discharging their responsibilities and being free of obligation, they are actually more deeply involved and have heavier obligations. After speaking of his persecutions which included shipwreck, stoning, and beatings, the apostle Paul said, "Besides these things that are without, there is that which presseth upon me daily, anxiety for all the churches." (II Cor. 11:28).

Why Go?

When one realizes that the people to whom the gospel will be preached often feel that they do not want it, that those who carry the gospel are often suspect, that those who preach salvation must pay their own expenses, that the carrying of the gospel is the hardest kind of work, and that one who preaches Christ becomes more deeply involved and must shoulder heavier responsibilities, one asks, "Well, then, why go?" This is a very good question, yet the answer is a very simple one. Christ commanded us to go. Matthew 28:19-

20, quoted earlier, charges every Christian, "Go ye therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them ... and teaching them ..." Looking behind the commandment, we discover the reason why Jesus gave this great commission to all Christians. The fact is that all men are lost without Christ, and only Christ can bring them salvation.

In John 14:6, we read, "Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, and the truth, and the life: no one cometh unto the Father, but by me." The only entrance into heaven is through Jesus Christ the divine Son of God. In John 8:24, Jesus had earlier said, "For except ye believe that I am he, ye shall die in your sins." When Jesus spoke of the fields that were white unto harvest more than 1900 years ago, there were only approximately 210 million people living on the earth, we are told. Today, there are more than three and one-fourth billion people living on the earth. The fields that were white then are far whiter now with a harvest of lost souls. Only through Christ can these billions be brought to salvation. This is why we must go.

The apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, "Whosoever shall call on the name of the Lord shall be saved." This means that all races, all nationalities, all men of all ages are invited to come to Christ. There are no limitations of any kind. "How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him whom they have not heard? and how shall they hear without a preacher? and how shall they preach, except they be sent?" (Rom. 10:13-15). All men are invited to come to Christ, so all men must know of the invitation. This is why we must go with the gospel throughout the world and to every human being.

### Great Rewards

There are great rewards waiting for those who carry the gospel of Christ to lost men. One of the greatest of these rewards comes in the realization that one is doing something of eternal value. Most of the things that we do are for only a little while and then are completely forgotten. When we work in the Cause of Christ what we are doing is of eternal significance. What a thrill comes from knowing that the teaching of a small child to believe in Christ may bear fruit through generations yet to be born. No life is a happy life which does not have a challenging purpose for which to live. It is in working as a partner with our Lord in bringing people to salvation that our lives are challenged by the highest purpose of all.

Just here I should like you to imagine a visit to a zoological garden, or as we more often say, a zoo. As I think back over the years I have visited many such zoos throughout our land. I can remember visiting those in Dallas, San Antonio, San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Memphis, Detroit, and the Bronx in New York. All are essentially the same. They have brought animals from all parts of the world and display them in proper cages for the public to see.

As one walks along the streets of the zoo he may chance to see a peacock preening himself and displaying the beauty of his feathers. He may watch a small flock of ducks as they finish eating the grain on the bank of the pond and then waddle to the edge of the water and float gently away. At another spot he pauses outside the strong iron bars that contain the Royal Bengal tiger. This magnificent specimen of the jungle eats, sleeps, and then paces back and forth in the short confines of his cage until he is almost neurotic. At the bear pits one sees a large grizzly bear, another great specimen of the wild outdoors. Here, in captivity, he is relatively tame, eating, sleeping, occasionally growling his rebellion, and gradually disintegrating. The story of all animals is essentially the same. They eat, they sleep, their biological needs are cared for, and then gradually they grow fat, become weak, and eventually sicken and die.

How different these animals in captivity are from their brothers who have remained free. The grizzly bear ranges over eight or ten miles on the slope of some mountain in Alaska, killing occasionally an antelope or even an elk. He has great strength, great ability, and is fearsome to all in his path. Similarly, the Royal Bengal tiger as he roams the jungle strikes fear to both man and beast, so great is his strength. In the open outdoors they are strong and vigorous. Their constant activities, their never-ending exercise, achieves for them the maximum of strength and power. In captivity, well fed and carefully protected, they weaken and die.

Christians, too, are never at their best when they simply take spiritual food, then rest quietly until the next time of feeding. It is only when Christians are active that their strength grows and they develop their maximum power. We learn by doing. We grow stronger by exercising. The early Christians, exemplified by the apostles, became great towers of strength because their Christian qualities were exercised and challenged all the while. Soon after the church began in Jerusalem persecutions followed. In Acts 8:4 we read, "They therefore that were scattered abroad went about preaching the word." The early Christians either had to get into the fight for the Cause of Christ, or get out entirely. Those who stayed in grew to be men and women of great strength. Paul, Timothy, Titus, and the others grew strong not by resting, but by working. We Christians today--for our own spiritual survival--must be active in carrying the gospel to those about us. Inactivity will cause us to weaken and may even bring us to spiritual death.

### A Suggestion

To the 1252 members of this congregation, I want to make a very serious and important suggestion. I want each one of us to commit himself, silently in his own heart to do all that is within his power in the remaining nine months of 1968 to bring at least one person to Christ. One-fourth of the year is already gone, but nine months yet remain. I believe that each one of us possesses the strength and the talents that are necessary to influence one lost soul to come to Christ and salvation within the remainder of this year. Think carefully before you decide upon the person. It may be someone for whom you work, or someone who works for you. It may be someone from whom you purchase goods, or it may be someone who purchases from you. It may be someone with whom you are in school, or it may

be someone who works beside you each day. It may be a member of your own family, or it may be a neighbor who lives next door. Somewhere within the shadow of your influence there is someone who can be brought to eternal salvation by your efforts during the next nine months if you will do your best.

No two of us are alike, therefore it is not possible to suggest the whole plan which you should follow. Some are older in years and can be less active physically. Others are younger and are more enthusiastic, and can therefore be more effective in person-to-person relationships. Some may accomplish this goal through the writing of letters and the sending of carefully chosen printed materials. Others may do it through teaching classes or counselling. Some may do it through the extending of the hospitality of the home and the dinner table. Some may do it through discreet invitations to hear speakers or to attend religious services. Some may do it through using radio and television. Some will use emotions of tender love and affection, others will use arguments of logic. Some may do it by example, while others may do it by direct teaching. But the fact is that all of us can do it if we try hard enough. The Lord will bless our efforts if we are willing to yield to him our talents.

For the sake of those who may be brought to Christ and for our own salvation's sake, we need to enter upon this great endeavor. Let no one think he is too old, nor too young. All of us have influence. All of us have opportunities to serve our Lord. As we actively engage in this work, we will feel a resurgence of Christian zeal and enthusiasm and constantly growing strength of the spirit. Spend much time in planning; spend much time in prayer. Constantly remember that those outside Christ are lost. Remember that Jesus alone could say, "I am the way."