

"CAN THERE BE A WHOLE CHRISTIANITY?"

Fifth in a series of Sermons on the

CRISES OF MOTIVATION

Text: Matthew 16:13-20

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by

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Let me tell you how the Christian Church began:

"Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do men say that the Son of man is?' And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.' Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ."

Matthew 16:13-20

The Church was born first of all with a question from Christ to his disciples: "Who do the people say that I am?" To this question came genuine human responses: "Rabbi, the people are troubled over you and confused. Some think you are an old prophet come alive, some think you are John the Baptist, etc..." Then Jesus posed the question to them directly and personally: "What about you? What do you think?" Peter answers with a reply that is as famous as Peter himself: "Thou art the Christ..." This answer is the major breakthrough of Peter's life and Biblical scholars agree that it is the dramatic center of each of the gospels. Peter gives the holy Messianic name to his leader Jesus of Nazareth, and in that unforgettable context, our Lord gives to Simon, the son of John, the Galilean fisherman, a name too, the name that is of tremendous significance to the whole comradeship of faith that will follow Peter and the disciples. Christ speaks to Simon: "And thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my church and the powers of death shall not prevail against it." The Lord gives Peter a name, challenges him with a commission and promises to him the victory of God in the face of inevitable trials -- even against the very "gates of evil."



So it was the Christian Church began. Christ himself is its most vital center and at the same time the Church is founded upon the shoulders of Peter and through him all Christian men and women who were to follow him. The Church grew toward the East and the West; it gathered strength and finally became the faith of the majority in the very Roman Empire that had at the first been implacable in its opposition. But, the solidarity at the beginning does not last. Two great rifts take place within Christianity which remain to this day. The first rift occurred toward the end of the first 1000 years between the Christians at Constantinople and at Rome. From this division came the two great classic traditions of Christendom: The Eastern Orthodox and the Roman Catholic, eastern and western Christianity. The second rift took place within the western side during the 16th century, the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation.

Today, therefore, there are three great families of Christendom and each of these has a distinctive emphasis, a difference, a tradition; added together, they form modern Christianity as it is today. Let us briefly consider each of these families in the light of their distinctive marks:

(1) The Roman Catholic Church has two very deep convictions which we must endeavor to understand:

(a) The first is the sense of unbroken continuity and tradition in the apostolic succession from the Apostle Peter to this very day that has been preserved within the Roman Catholic communion. This gift of continuity/tradition is a very rich endowment at the very soul of Catholicism and there can be no adequate interpretation of Catholic practice or doctrine unless we first try to understand this essential ingredient.

(b) A second crucial affirmation of Roman Catholic faith is the conviction that God has granted unique authority to the Bishop of Rome who bears the apostolic designation first granted to Peter and which has been transferred from bishop to bishop down through the years in human history. This singular right of authority in matters of faith and morals which rests with the successor of Peter is a second crucial ingredient.

2. The emphasis of Eastern Orthodox Christianity has been from the beginning more inward and personal, the intense mystical relationship of the believer with God. Whereas the orientation of Western Christianity was more organizational and historical, the orientation of Eastern Christianity has been more mystical. Therefore, a profoundly personal kind of sacramental theology has developed within orthodoxy that highlights the communion of the believer with the Holy.

3. From the beginning Protestantism has been ideological and implication oriented. Each believer has been challenged to take the Holy Bible into his own hands, to hear for himself its message and to spell out the implications. There was a corresponding de-emphasis upon structural continuity since the Protestant saw the continuity preserved in the work of the Holy Spirit, making the gospel message real. Therefore, Peter's successors were those who believed in the Christ of Peter. In other words, the



ideological reality was a more vital reality than the structures of the Church and not only that, the working out of the idea in practical ways became the individual responsibility of each Christian. Naturally, this individualistic emphasis resulted in incredible productivity as Protestant Christians established churches and denominations by the hundreds. This individualistic creativity has been both our joy and our burden.

Think about this threefold development of Christendom in another way -- each has come back from Caesarea Philippi with an unforgettable experience. At the deepest center (confirmed by the Apostles' Creed which all three traditions affirm) each community of faith has made the same central discovery: that Jesus Christ is Lord--but each has come back with a distinctive response to that central fact.

(1) The Orthodox Christian was won by the sheer wonder of the discovery--"I tell you, Peter, flesh and blood hath not revealed...", and, therefore, his orientation is toward mystery.

(2) The Protestant was struck by the fact that if Christ is Lord, then he has replaced all other rivals, "Thou art the Christ...", and he has challenged each disciple to spell out this fact. Therefore, the orientation is toward freedom.

(3) The Roman Catholic came down from Caesarea Philippi with the awesome challenge to Peter ringing in his ears: "Thou art Peter and upon this rock I shall build my Church." Therefore, his orientation is toward the Kingdom of God.

Now the very important question to ask is this: Can these three families of faith stand together or will they stand apart? What are the prospects for the ecumenical movement which in these last few years has been working from many different directions to find common ground among the worldwide communities of faith?

I believe the prospects for the ecumenical movement are very good if we can somehow honestly affirm two truths:

(1) The first is that we all hold the common central fact of Jesus Christ, the Lord. We simply must start at the most essential core of Christian faith. The clear fact is that all three historic branches of Christianity have solidarity at this point. The creedal statement of the World Council of Churches adopted at New Delhi is unmistakably clear on this center.

"The World Council of Churches is a fellowship of churches which confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures and therefore seek to fulfill together their common calling to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit."

And there is no question regarding Catholic doctrine at this point which all Catholic creedal statements affirm. Karl Barth has said that Christian theology and discussion is one of those sciences that "must always begin at the

beginning," and his advice is good counsel for the ecumenical movement. Begin at Caesarea Philippi with Jesus Christ and we will have come very close to each other. But, if we begin at the edges, then we shall find many reasons to keep away from encounter. The individualistic freedom emphasis of the Protestant, the tradition and kingdom emphasis of the Catholic, the mystery emphasis of the Orthodox, are implications at the edge that have each followed out from the center which in all three cases is Christ himself. We must start at the beginning which is Christ, not freedom, not tradition, not worship--but Christ.

(2) Secondly, if we can honestly discover and affirm that our Christian neighbors' distinctive experience of faith is vital for us. I mean that we must grow up enough to recognize our own blind spots and needs which in many ways are complimented and fulfilled by our neighbor who stands within the point of view of a different tradition.

We may soon see the emergence of a new commonwealth understanding of the Christian Church where the heritage and conviction of one tradition is not sacrificed in the coming together of different traditions but is tested and in the end made more authentic by the fellowship of different traditions, who in their diversity still hold honestly to the center, Jesus Christ, the Lord. It may be that the World Council of Churches will be God's means of bringing that exciting commonwealth of faith into being.