

THE CREDIBILITY OF CHRISTIANITY

A Series of Four Sermons

Preached at
The Union Church of Manila

by

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I

"REMARKABLE BUILDING STONE"

Acts 2: 1-42

November 12, 1967

I begin today a series of addresses on the Credibility of the Christian faith for our century. In the face of such an ambitious theme let us first of all attempt to understand Christianity as it was told and lived in the first century and to examine its amazing success with the first century man. This will prepare us to make a contemporary evaluation. When the early church began to share the faith what did they say? Who followed their affirmation and believed it? What did these new followers find so appealing? What did other people find objectionable? Jesus of Nazareth had predicted that what would draw some men to himself and become for them a building stone would become for others a barrier, a stone of stumbling. His prediction was correct then and still is.

What did the first century disciples actually say to people? Most scholars are in agreement* that the early kerigma (preaching) was divided into three main parts:

(1) A simple, direct, activist narrative of the life of Christ, what he said and did with very little comment by the preacher as if the sheer inner force of these acts and words were enough in themselves. They recounted the death of Christ, an actual event in our behalf and his victory over death, an actual event in our behalf.

(2) Secondly they affirmed that this Jesus of Nazareth was the fulfillment of all of the Old Testament hopes and dreams for Messiah (See Acts 2: 1-42). Paul expands this second part of the message to include the fact that Christ is the fulfillment to the universal man's dreams for wholeness, life, rescue (See Acts 17).

(3) Since Jesus Christ deserves to reign over all of life the disciples called upon men to follow Christ as Lord, to obey him and to know him, to be baptized in the church.

The appeal of this basic and forthright message was one of the incredible facts of the first century. This gospel with its strong claim upon men spread like a prairie fire throughout the whole of the Roman world. The message about Jesus Christ turned out to have within it a powerful appeal for the three major kinds of first century man represented by the Jew, the Greek and the Roman. It seems to me that in a loose sort of way these three kinds of people - Jewish, Greek, Roman - symbolize three kinds of modern man and even more than that three moods within a single man.

*See Apostolic Teaching, C. H. Dodds

I. In sheer percentages the greatest following of Christ come from the Jewish people of the first century. They are family oriented, deeply religious, nationalistic, underdeveloped economically, culturally rich. They do not enjoy the wealth of the Romans or the educational privilege of the Greeks but nevertheless they have a very rich treasure in the literature and tradition of the Old Testament and they know it. This knowledge tends to make them tribal in contrast to the more internationally minded Greeks and Romans.

The Jewish man saw in Jesus Christ the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. Christ made sense as the Lord, Patriarch, King for a basically family oriented society.

On the negative side the Jewish man could not help but recognize in the teaching and ministry of Christ a "no" to the status quo of strictly national religion and also tribal exclusivism. Not only that but Jesus is a disappointment at least at first glance to the religious expectation of what God's Messiah would be like, nevertheless many Jews followed this man.

II. The Greeks of the first century represented the true intellectuals. Greek language and philosophy was the marvel of the world. For the Greek it was the very freshness of the Christian idea that was so captivating to them. Its very size and intensity made the Christian gospel big enough to integrate the many concepts into a meaningful whole. This logos sweep of Christianity won many Greeks away from the tribal city gods of Asia Minor.

But the word that becomes concrete and earthy in our behalf, that suffers the humiliation of genuine identification with man in his whole existence was a hard barrier for the lover of pure spiritual idea.

III. The Romans are the practical organization men of the first century. They tend to be non-ideological, devoted supremely to order and performance. It was the great power of Jesus Christ that challenged and won them. They observed his affect upon people's lives and saw in that strong affect a power that made practical sense to them.

But the fact that Christ inevitably makes a claim upon my highest loyalty is very hard to accept for a man who has built his whole success upon being precisely non-ideological and has politically toyed with every loyalty to find which one best serves his own career. Therefore the Roman must go far deeper than he has ever needed to if he is to follow Christ.

The fact is that the message about Jesus Christ in spite of all the impossibilities of the first century became credible to these three kinds of people.

He fulfilled the Jewish hope, made sense to the Greek and won the Roman.