

# CHRIST, THE CORNERSTONE

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Sermon preached at the Provincial Synod of Ontario, held in Ottawa, Sept. 16, 1919

*Lo, I am with you always, even unto the consummation of the age.—ST. MATT. 28:20.*

THERE have been from time to time in the history of the Church certain critical occasions when it has been called upon to face problems of exceptional difficulty, and when the outlook, if not exactly of impenetrable gloom, has been clouded and full of perplexities. The carrying on of the work of Christ in the world will always be an arduous task, but sometimes the permanent difficulties are emphasised and increased by abnormal conditions. The present is such an occasion. Problems long latent can no longer be ignored; difficulties ever present have become extremely acute; and in the turmoil and confusion everywhere found it is not easy to discern the best course of action. Under such circumstances there is needed every source of both consolation and inspiration. Both are to be found in abundance in the promise contained in my text.

## PRESENT CONDITIONS.

It is impossible in the brief time at my disposal to enter upon a comprehensive survey of present conditions in the world, nor is it necessary to do so, as they are sufficiently familiar to all. Touching briefly upon a few salient points, we observe wide-spread social unrest—an insistent challenge of age—long order, fierce questionings of principles in political, economical, and social life, which had seemed to have become almost axiomatic. The Church, and every form of Christianity, organized or unorganized, has been and is being violently attacked. Strange cults are claiming to take its place. A novelist of distinction is insistently proclaiming a new Evangel, while the creator of an undying figure in detective fiction has become the popular Apostle of the strange cult called Spiritualism. I need not dwell further upon the present perplexing condition of affairs. In what spirit are we to face these and kindred problems?

It is open to us, of course, to throw up the sponge and to acknowledge defeat. We can join the crowd of those both outside and within our ranks, who love to proclaim in strident tones that the Church is a failure, especially when she declines to be rushed into some course of action upon which they have set their hearts, whose chief topic is her obvious shortcomings, and who seem to find their chief delight in exposing her defects. But this is the counsel of despair, and in the cause of Christ there is no room for despair.

## CHRIST'S PROMISE OUR INSPIRATION.

The promise of Christ quoted by me supplies at once the reason for the rejection of undue pessimism, and the inspiration needed for the great effort the Church is called upon to make. The success of any purely human institution must always depend upon the perfection of its organization, the vitality and energy of its members, the wealth and service that it can command, and the prestige it enjoys in the world. When these human elements fail, the institution is doomed. With the Church of Christ this is not the case. Behind its human organization, behind the faulty instruments employed to carry out its divine purpose, there is always the eternal presence and the eternal power of Christ. Every Christian knows that, and every Christian I suppose believes it. But all do not draw the necessary inference. However dark the outlook, however ineffective the instruments for the work, however small the achievement may appear, there is one thing that the Church of Christ cannot achieve, and that is absolute failure. On that assumption all our efforts are based. We can take the greatest risks, we can face the most unpromising outlook, with full confidence that the eternal power of Christ is on our side. Our message, however feebly delivered, is still a divine message, the presence of Christ with His Church, however obscured, still remains, His redemptive power is still there and available, even if for the

time rejected with contempt. This is, after all, God's world, and He undoubtedly will carry out His purposes and cause His will to prevail.

## WINNING THE WORLD FOR CHRIST.

Holding this belief, we can in quietness and confidence proceed with our effort to win the world for Christ. We can aim at nothing less than the gradual establishment of a new foundation for society and all social relationship—that foundation being the principles of the teaching of Christ. The complex social system existing to-day is by no means altogether to be banned; there is much to be said in its favour. It has made for great progress in many directions, scientific and others; it has fostered certain characteristics of immense value, such as thrift, initiative, justifiable ambition, unbounded energy in the discovery and development of the natural resources of the world tending to make life easier and more desirable. But speaking generally, the foundation principle on which all this complex structure is based is frankly not Christian. For while guarding carefully against all exaggeration, and making full allowance for the great volume of disinterested services to humanity on the part of individuals, of the multitude of lives that have set forth the noble principle of self-sacrifice, of the wonderful efforts of philanthropy and altruistic endeavour that illumine the pages of history, yet, speaking generally, that foundation-principle has been and is a self-centred one—the principle of getting rather than of giving. And to this one underlying principle many of the conspicuous faults of civilization as we know it may be traced. They proceed from it automatically, as fruit from seed, or branches from the parent stem. There is latent in it, and has sprung into full growth from it, the terrible fault of "pleonexia" grasping too much (quite inadequately translated "covetousness"), against which our Lord uttered so grave a warning.

In any effort at reconstruction we surely must endeavour to build on Christ's foundation-principle, which was plainly that of giving rather than getting. Let me not be misunderstood. One of the chief incentives to men must always be the desire to make provision for themselves and those dependent upon them. But there are two methods of approach in giving this natural desire full play. One lays stress upon the "getting" incidental to its active operation, and the other upon the "giving." The latter is Christ's principle, and it is that which must be substituted for the former. To produce such a complete change of outlook might seem impracticable and visionary were it not for three considerations. First, that this is Christ's teaching, and that the living Christ is behind and inspiring every effort to put it into practice. Secondly, that He clearly meant it to be the foundation of all relationships for the many, and not merely an esoteric cult for a select few. Thirdly, that man has shown himself capable to an extraordinary degree of responding to such an appeal.

It has recently been said that the saddest feature of the present situation is not that the indifferent, the worldly, and the materialist are turning their backs upon the Church, but that men of high ideals and lofty vision are somewhat sadly seeking other sources of inspiration, because the Church seems to fail to make the very appeal that its divine message warrants. Why then not make that appeal? Why should it not by Christian influence become an axiomatic rule of human conduct rather than an exceptional occurrence that a man should give of his best as well because it is his best, and because as a disciple of Jesus Christ he is bound to do so, as because of the material reward it will bring? Why should it not become the natural and accepted principle for a man himself to refuse to receive more than his service to the community is justly worth? Is it unthinkable that the ("pleonexia") the spirit of grasping all you can quite apart from actual deserts, which is a strongly marked

feature of industrial and social disturbances at the present time, might come to be looked upon by all classes as a mortal sin?

What is certain is that the familiar palliatives are proving themselves useless in the face of the present distress. Very well then. At least we can try to work into the foundations of life as we see it this great fundamental principle laid down by Christ Himself—"It is more blessed to give than to receive." Is it beyond the bounds of possibility to get men to try out this principle in politics, in business, in all social relationships? It has the supreme merit that if we venture to put it to the touch, we should do so in the name and power of Jesus Christ. It may seem a strange, a *revolutionary appeal*, but if made in sincerity would I believe gain a hearing. I am sure of this—namely that Christ meant His principles to permeate every department of active life. As I have pointed out elsewhere, it is a fact of remarkable significance that in the well-known parable of the Great Supper, the call to associate themselves with Him comes first to those engaged in successfully carrying on the great activities of human life—commerce, production, and the home-making instinct which is the foundation of human society. It is the brain power, the energy, the gift for organization, the ceaseless perseverance, the capacity which brings success, which He desires to enlist in His service, in order that the world may become His world, and that men may be shown that there is nothing incompatible between carrying on the great activities of the world and the closest association with Himself and His teaching. Had these men accepted His invitation they would have gone back to introduce into their activities and interests His principles and His spirit. But they made excuse on grounds that seemed to them perfectly valid, and much of the influence that Christianity ought to have in the world has been and is being lost by the perpetuation of their mistake. Christianity has not yet been tried as Christ meant and means it to be tried, not, that is to say as a side issue, but as the guiding principle of all the activities and interests of this intensely absorbing life of ours. We could at least try this solution of our terribly perplexing problems with the conviction that this thing is of God through Jesus Christ, and that with God all things are possible.

## REUNION OF CHRISTIANS.

So also the belief in the presence of Christ with his people will help us to approach the problem of an apparently hopelessly divided Christendom in a spirit of hope. For all these differences arise subsequently to our belief in and acceptance of Him. He is the source from which every manifestation of Christianity at least claims to flow. These manifestations are of almost infinite variety, some even appearing contradictory to others. But in His sight, none that are true can really contradict each other. He must see at least the possibility of harmony, where we through limited vision only perceive differences. But looking below the surface it becomes clear that ultimate harmony will come not by any process of facile accommodation, but by holding fast without compromise to such truths as by long experience we have found to be of tried value in the spiritual life, and which if obscured or lost would mean a loss to the spiritual life. Paradoxical as it may sound, I believe that reconciliation is far more likely to come by passionately holding the truth which we possess, and which seems vital to our conception of religion, provided that such uncompromising adherence does not carry with it contempt for others whose convictions are different, than by the various short cuts to an unreal unity which are so tempting in the face of our present gigantic problems. The living and ever present Christ will show how these vital convictions can be brought together and harmonized. Nothing of influence would be gained in the world by a presentation of Christianity which has purchased a semblance of unity at the sacrifice of vital conviction on either side. It is by the harmonizing of these vital convictions that I am convinced that Christ will bring about a true unity of His people. It may be longer in coming, than we, as we see things now, could wish, but when it comes it will be eternal.

I know full well that the criticism of some at least of my brethren of such a statement as this

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