

Annual Sermon of Convention—The Unchangeable Christ.

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"Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever."—Hebrews 13:8.

The letter to the Hebrews is among the greatest of the New Testament writings. It is strong in doctrine, hopeful in spirit, rich in promise. The key-word to the letter as a whole is "better." In thirteen different places is Christ or some phase of his work declared better than the corresponding teaching of Judaism. The argument which the writer forces to the front, is, that the gospel is superior to the law by so much as Christ is superior to angels, superior to Moses, superior to Aaron, and in his vicarious sacrifice, superior to all the smoking altars in Israel. At the time when it was written the Hebrew Christians were exposed to bitter persecutions on account of their faith and loyalty to Jesus Christ; and they were now sorely tempted to abandon their hope in Jesus and turn again to Judaism. It was, therefore, the main purpose of the writer of this epistle to avert such a catastrophe, and to point these tempted ones to Jesus as their only hope of deliverance. All things outward had changed with these Hebrew Christians since they had broken faith with their fathers—"stoned," "tempted," "sawn asunder," "slain with the sword," are the graphic touches by which the inspired writer describes their persecutions for Christ's sake. What these tried ones needed was to find rest amid unrest, but where could this be found? "Look," says the sacred writer, "to the unchangeable Christ," as the pole star of your hope: "For he hath said, I will never leave thee nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, the Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me." Trust him who is always the same, "Jesus Christ."

Their needs are our needs: We too are constantly under the necessity of change. Born amid change, surrounded by change, and knowing nothing by experience but change, and yet possessing a heart that obstinately clings to its longings for the unchangeable and the eternal—a heart whose instinctive cry is: "O thou who changest not, abide with me." Hence the Hebrew writer sets the thought of the "unchangeable Christ" over against all that is changing and changeable in this life, that we may say with Moses: "Lord thou hast been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting thou art God." For there is only one thing that will enable us to overcome the else intolerable certainty of uncertainty, and that is to fall back upon the doctrine of our text: "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever." For what Christ was he is, and what he was and is, he will for ever be—"the same." This points us to a sure foundation on which to rest amid the shifting sands of earth and time. Our vision of God may change, because we ourselves are so subject to change, but God remains the same. And this sameness of Jesus Christ is consistent with an infinite unfolding of new glories, new thoughts, and new hopes, as new questions and new generations arise, and the church seeks fresh guidance. But Jesus will ever stand abreast of all the ages. He towers high above all human progress. The noted Renan said: "Whatever may be the surprises of the future, Jesus will never be surpassed. His legend will grow young without ceasing; his suffering will call forth tears without end. All ages will proclaim that among the sons of men there is none born greater than Jesus." More and more does this most critical, this kaleidoscopic age of ours need Jesus. It is not so complimentary to be called a critic as many are wont to think. For the greater the man the less critical is he. Criticism is always more or less destructive; and it is much easier to destroy than to create, to pull down than to build up. It takes skill and patience to erect a great building while an idle tramp can burn it down. The more critical a man is the less spiritual he is likely to be, and the same may be said of an age. We boast much of our age, but what great achievements in things spiritual have we accomplished? There has been great advance in our age, but it has been largely along commercial lines. It is true we are living at the high-noon of the greatest commercial age the world has ever witnessed. But commerce is pageantry when compared with things spiritual. The greatest commercial age of Corinth, of Paul's day, has vanished, while Paul's letters to the Corinthians still live to bless the world, and lift the sons of men toward God. In our age there are no great spiritual movements, no great uplifts in righteousness, such as we should reasonably expect. There are no poetic stars rising to take the place of those setting. Our age has not produced a Tennyson or a Longfellow. Why not? Because the age is not calling for them. It is the millionaire that this age glorifies beyond the greatest poetic genius God ever lent the earth. Then in the higher regions, that of things spiritual, we have but little whereof to boast. To be counted great today at least in things literary, we must try to break down some of the long cherished hopes of the saints. You must attempt to unfix the fastness of things, especially in the realm of theology,

and you will be called learned, if not an original thinker. If you want your name sounded abroad in this age, tell the people that faith in the God of Abraham is a thing of the past, and not at all necessary today and you will get a large following. For the cry of this age is "who will show us a new thing," even though it be irreverent or barbarous. For the God of Moses and the Pentateuch is indeed ancient history compared with the more scientific Deity of current date; and the Lord God of Elijah is only a dwarf alongside the Heavenly Father of the new theology, who has flung wide open the gates of heaven to all mankind without regard to character. So true is all this that we feel justified in taking up the old lament: "A man was famous according as he had lifted up axes upon the thick trees; but now they break down the carved work thereof at once with axes and hammers." (Ps. 74: 5, 6) Once the man who shouldered his axe, entered the thick forests and felled the great trees and erected a temple for the worship of God, got the praise of men. "He loved our nation and hath built for us a synagogue." But all you have to do today is to take your little hatchet and march into the sanctuary of God, and hack and disfigure the divinely carved pillars of truth, and you will be called an up-to-date theologian, if not an original thinker. One writer deeply regrets that the English language has no word to express the opposite of "edification"—to indicate the pulling down process. We fear it would be an over-worked word in our day. But after all are we not over-alarmed, because a few of the more daring scholars are running along the garnished walls of inspired truth, tapping on a sapphire here and a Jasper there, and suggesting that according to the latest discoveries in German theology, that the sapphire should have been placed a foot higher up in the walls of divine truth, and the Jasper at least one foot and six and one half inches lower down than they now appear. And all this learned talk is going on in spite of the fact that the "unchangeable Christ" was there when the walls of divine truth were going up, and ordered the inspired workmen to place the sapphire and the Jasper and all other gems of divine truth just where they are now found, and will remain after the radical critics and their little hatchets have returned to their kindred elements—"dust to dust and ashes to ashes." But the best men of this age and by far the vast majority of the scholars of the age are not of this Athenian type of mind. The men of the largest brains and warmest hearts are in line with the Book of Revelation, "as once for all delivered unto the saints." These are our deep-souled, purposeful men, men who are laboring side by side and hand in hand with the unchangeable Christ in the progress of his kingdom through the ages.

Now, will you note some of the outstanding facts, some of the great mountain peaks from which the "unchangeable Christ" shines forth in all true sunlit splendor, and in all the excellencies of his high and holy character. Therefore brethren, I ask you to consider with me the doctrine of the "unchangeable Christ," as it stands related, not only to the hope of the individual Christian, but as the only sure hope of the whole church of God. Consider then:

I. First, that Jesus Christ is unchangeable in his Deity: That Christ was divine, that he was God was most emphatically and repeatedly declared by himself, in language that the people of his day clearly understood, so that both friend and foe knew well that he claimed equality with God. He said to Philip: "Philip, he that hath seen me hath seen the Father, and why sayest thou then show us the Father. Believest thou not that I am in the Father and the Father in me?" "I and my Father are one." "Before Abraham was, I am." For this claim of equality with God the Jews sought to kill him, because he had not only broken the Sabbath, but said also God was his Father, making himself equal with God." The doctrine of Christ's Deity is woven into the very texture of the gospel narrative. Christ had an existence and a glory with the Father before the world was. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made by him." "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory as of the only begotten of the Father full of grace and truth." There are indeed mysteries connected with the divinity of Christ, but there are mysteries in all things we see and hear and touch. But if God has revealed himself in star and sky, in earth and flower in the crannied wall, why not in human nature? The incarnation of the Son of God is a necessity, if God is love. For love always seeks the most positive and direct means of communication. A French writer is credited with the statement: "That the conception and delineation of such a character as that of the man Christ Jesus, by such men as the fishermen of Galilee, would have been a greater miracle than the actual existence of such a man." The writer to the Hebrews addresses Christ as God in chapter one: "Thy throne O God, is forever and ever." These words are employed in the midst of an argument in which the writer is showing Christ superior to angels, and would he do this if he did not wish to prove Christ divine? We think not. He also calls Christ the maker of worlds, and bids the angels worship him—"By whom also he made the worlds; and let all the angels of God worship him." Paul wrote of Jesus as "Christ over all, God blessed forever." For: "In him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily." "The fulness of God," says doctor Maclaren, "is

another expression of the whole sum and aggregate of all the energies, powers and attributes of the divine nature, the whole Godhead in its plentitude and abundance. That abundance of the resources of the whole Deity inspired and incarnated in Jesus Christ our Lord." Then all equal honors as God are his. "All men should honor the Son even as they honor the Father." As we think of him as the ever gracious, sympathetic friend of men that he was in the days of his flesh, and remember that he is unchangeable, with what confident hope should we do his will, and with what blessed anticipation should we look to the meeting with him on the un fading shores of eternity. When God said, "I am the Lord, I change not," he put forth immutability as a proof of divinity. Then if Christ is unchangeable he is divine. Doctor Pendleton says: "Change belongs to things and creatures—Immutability belongs to God alone." Jesus Christ is immutable, therefore he is God. And what he was and is, he will forever be, for he is unchangeable—"Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever."

"For all creation its evangel utters forth abroad
In mine ears,
When now I know—my Saviour Christ is God."

II. But again, Jesus Christ is unchangeable in his humanity. That Jesus was human in soul and body is the testimony of both gospel and epistle. For Christ had more than a human body, he had a human soul. "He took not on him the nature of angels, but he took on him the seed of Abraham," i. e., he was thoroughly human. He assumed in all respects, sin excepted, the nature he came to redeem. To prove Jesus a man is all the evidence we need that he had a human soul. That Jesus was a man we have his own words in evidence: "But now ye seek to kill me, a man that hath told you the truth." Again, "Whom do men say that I the Son of Man am?" We do not speak of a man's body as the man. We call his body without his soul his corpse; and his soul without his body his spirit. It takes soul and body in union to constitute what we call a man. Jesus Christ was a man, therefore he had a human body and a human soul. In Christ humanity was not deified, nor was divinity humanized. But Jesus had two natures, the one human the other divine. But there was only one personality, the man Christ Jesus—the God-man: "Great is the mystery of Godliness!" Great also the mystery of humanity. Man also has two natures, the one mortal the other immortal. If great the controversy, great also the fact, for we read that Jesus hungered, thirsted, slept and wept all as man. As God we cannot say he hungered, thirsted, wept and slept. Yet we see him performing both human and divine acts, doing both the works of a man and of God. Behold him footsore and weary, resting himself upon the curb of Jacob's well; and as he wipes the perspiration from his brow, I know he is human, a man, a tired man; but when he unseals the fountain of the waters of eternal life, and satisfied the soul thirst of the woman of Samaria, I know he is divine, that he is God. When I see him asleep in Peter's boat on storm-tossed Galilee, I see a brother man; but when he awakes and in Godlike majesty stills the troubled sea, I know the God of the sea is there. When I see him weeping with Mary and Martha at the grave, I know he is a man touched with the feelings of our infirmities; but when I hear him speak into that tomb the resurrection words, "Lazarus come forth," and the sheeted dead comes forth, I see he is God though in human form. When on the cross I see from pierced hands and feet blood flows mingled down, I know he is flesh and blood; but when I see him snatch from the jaws of death a defiled soul, and passing it that same day all purified into Paradise, I know he is God, the Saviour promised long. O, did ever such weakness and such power, such poverty and such riches meet in one personality as we behold in Jesus of Nazareth? it is only as we grasp the thought of his twofold nature, human and divine, that we can at all solve the mysteries of his acts. But beholding here the God-man, "hope springs eternal in the human breast."

"A lowly man, he takes my sin and bears my heavy load;
A lowly man, he takes my hand and leads me up the road;
And when I know this lowly man is my Creator! God!
Oh, this hath solved me much dark speech; and loosed
Tongues that were dumb,
For all creation round me now a gospel has become.
And what had seemed to me mere wild confusion, Babel,
Is now a fire-tongued Pentecost, proclaiming—Christ is able."

This great Christ is still touched with the feelings of our infirmities and he is still the same. Christ did not become human for three and thirty years only, but for all eternity. After the resurrection he lost no interest in toiling humanity. We behold him at the Sea of Galilee clothed in resurrection power, telling his discouraged and tired disciples how to win in their toil: "Cast the net on the right side of the ship and ye shall find." From the highest heaven he still directs his toiling disciples with the gracious promise: "Lo, I am with you always."

"Always" with us, "always" with us,
Words of cheer and words of love,
Thus the risen Saviour whispers
From his dwelling-place above.

With us when with sin we struggle,
Giving strength and courage too,
Bidding us to falter never,
But to him be ever true."

III. Once more, Jesus Christ is unchangeable in his love,