



Sermons

"A CRISIS OF CONSCIENCE"

Sunday Morning, August 2, 1964
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
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Scriptural Reference: II Corinthians 5:18-21

I heard once of a pastor who resigned his church, and of the pulpit committee that was appointed to find his replacement. In asking the members what kind of man they wanted, one person was very specific to the committee. He said: "I want you to look for a preacher who does not claim to sing, who has never studied Greek, and above all, who has never been to the Holy Land." He added: "I'm sick of all three."

Now I suspect some of you may have shared a similar uneasiness about sending your preacher on a trip around the world—a fear that you would hear of nothing else thereafter and might go blind looking at slides. Let me assure you quickly that I am aware of such a danger, and shall do my best to shield you from such "overexposure." However, on the other side of the coin is the fact that your generosity made the whole experience possible, and I would be solely amiss if I shared nothing with you. As you would quite naturally expect, I am very full of impressions at this moment, so if you will permit me, I shall endeavor to lead your worship today by speaking out of the events of the last five weeks.

The phrase which stands as the title of this sermon pretty well sums up the essence of my experience. At its deepest level, this trip produced "a crisis of conscience." I tried to travel with open eyes, and much of what I saw cut straight across the grain of my moral and spiritual sensitivity.

For example, I experienced this crisis of conscience repeatedly in the material or economic realm. I would not say I was shocked or surprised by the massive poverty we found, for I have been hearing of this all my life. However, there is a tremendous difference between knowing something abstractly and experiencing the same reality directly. In this sense I shall always be a sadder man, for no one could see what we saw and not be burdened with the plight of deprived humanity. For instance, I cannot erase from memory the sight we encountered one Sunday afternoon in Hong Kong. We stopped in front of a crowded line of concrete buildings, each one six stories high. We were told that this is where 60,000 Chinese refugees live—in an area not much bigger than our church property here on Frankfort Avenue. They sleep six to the room—sometimes two or three families together—and have to share a common kitchen and bath. Few of the children go to school, and the more fortunate men, if they can get work at all in one of the factories, labor seven days a week, fifty-two weeks a year, for an average pay of \$25 a month. Or again, I can still see an early morning scene in the capitol of India. We had flown all night from Tel Aviv to Delhi, and by the time we cleared through customs the sun was just coming up. As we rode on the bus from the airport in the dawning light, we saw people by the hundreds getting up out of gutters and off sidewalks and from parks where they had slept the night before. One did not

have to be told that these folks had no home, and that one of these mornings they would not get up at all, but would be disposed by the city agency that has to collect corpses each day. I do not recall seeing hardly any fat people in Asia, but I did see countless ribs that were easily distinguishable.

Sights like this multiplied endlessly cannot help but fill one with fear, for this is social dynamite of the most potent sort in our awakening world. As James Baldwin has said: "The most dangerous creature alive is the man who has nothing to lose." There is a vacuum of poverty in our world that sinful human nature will not forever tolerate. From a strictly practical sense, the "haves" of our world must grapple earnestly with the problem of deprivation. However, my spiritual sensitivity cried out to me here even more urgently. I have to admit that my belief in God's concern for each individual was sorely tried by what I saw, yet I do affirm it, for it is one of the keystones of Christianity. Therefore, if God does know and love each one of those wretched creatures, then I as a Christian cannot be indifferent to their plight or look forgetfully in the other direction. Like a knife on sensitive skin, the plight of the hungry masses cuts the tissue of my conscience.

A similar crisis was precipitated for me in the area of the relation of the races of the world. Here again, it was a question of experiencing something emotionally which I had only known intellectually. I had read how the non-white races outnumber the white man by about six to one, but I do not think I had ever sensed the immense proportions of this statistic until we touched down on several continents and were at times the only white people amid a sea of brown or black or yellow faces. It was in these moments that I realized anew the sheer folly of a racism in which the white man treats the non-white a certain way solely on the basis of color. The marks of this kind of discrimination are everywhere, and increasingly they are being noticed and resented. To a degree that never existed before, it seems men are becoming color-minded and race-conscious. And this raises a possibility too frightful to imagine. I am not attempting a play on words when I say that we are in a race for our lives in the field of race relations. To put the issue bluntly: can the white man learn to love before the non-whites learn to hate? Can we remove the causes of bitterness before bitterness destroys us all? This is the question in the world of the mid-1960's. If we white people so conduct ourselves that we solidify all the "colored" nations against us, the next war could be a racial war in which the white people of the world would be totally outnumbered. Woe unto our children and our children's children if we do not find a way to live together by righteousness instead of by racism. I returned deeply disturbed of conscience in this area.

But perhaps my greatest crisis of all was in the realm of religion, where we encountered first-hand all of the major faiths of the world. To be sure, there is no shortage of religion--there were shrines, temples and holy people everywhere we went. Rampant atheism is not the crucial problem, nor did there appear to be a lack of faith. The real difficulty was the nature of these religions and the kinds of gods they worship. If I had ever been tempted to believe that all religions are basically the same, this trip would have destroyed the theory, for they emphatically are not. I have said quite often from this pulpit that it is not the act of believing but the object of belief that is ultimately important religiously. These last few weeks confirmed that opinion, because the nature of these non-Christian divinities has shaped the total approach to life in these countries. These people seem to have a vague sense that there is a Higher Power back of it all, but as to what this Power is like

or how many there are or what such an Absolute wants, they simply do not know. And thus life is for them a fearful and uncertain and superstitious sort of thing. There is nothing to do but sink the intellect into a bottomless relativity and adopt the attitude of pessimistic resignation. We went to a temple in Japan one day where the worshiper could buy a little doll with a face but no feet. It was called "a diruma," and was like a rounded toy in our country which when hit will always return to a standing position. To me this symbolized the Eastern religions. Man knows nothing for certain about anything ultimate, so he attempts "to roll" with the external blows of life and remain impervious. We saw the pilgrims who had walked for months to dip in the River Ganges, hoping it really did begin to flow in heaven. We saw the Temple of the 1001 Gods where each idol was different but all had a scowl on their faces. We inhaled the incense that is supposed to placate the gods. And in the midst of it all my heart ached for what these people either did not know or would not accept. The belief in only one God, the Creator, who has shown Himself in time and demonstrated His purpose in history--this is totally different from the religions that still grip most of humanity. And I firmly believe this is the crucial factor in changing the basic conditions of these lands. These people are what they are because they believe what they believe. One illustration of this is the futile attempt being made in India to wipe out malaria. Because the Hindu deems all living things to be an expression of divinity, they will not kill the mosquito. Here a health problem ultimately reduces itself to a religious question. Thus, I am not being a bigot or a partisan, I do not believe, to say that the basic issue in every place is religious. To the great non-Christian masses, God as we know Him in Christ is unknown.

These are but three of the areas where my conscience was disturbed because of what my eyes saw. This is a higher and more complex planet than I ever imagined, and the more I saw it the more I was caused to ponder. However, it would be very untrue to imply that my total impression was a negative one. Alongside all that disturbed my conscience, there was equally as much to confirm my previous convictions. I would have to say that I believe I have returned a more convinced Christian than ever before. Quite frankly, "the key" I have found in Jesus Christ fits "the lock" of the problems I found in the world. There was no place, no situation, no condition anywhere on this globe to which the truth in Christ seemed irrelevant. If everyone involved had been thoroughly Christian, every dilemma I encountered could have been solved. Therefore, my crisis of conscience did not thrust me into absolute despair, but rather issued forth in a challenge to my Christian commitment. I realized more than ever before what a treasure we have in Christ and how badly this is needed in our world. Thus, as an individual Christian and as pastor of this church, I came back determined to make a fresh rededication to the task that lies ahead.

For example, we Christians can address ourselves to the material needs of the world. Already much is being done by our missionaries and government representatives. One day we saw an excited crowd of people beside a road in Jordan, and I thought there had been a wreck. However, when we got closer, it turned out to be a United Nations truck giving sacks of food to the Arab refugees. These were people who had been forcibly driven from their homes and had everything taken away. On each sack was the symbol of two clasped hands of friendship, and our guide said this meant it was surplus food from America. Then with deep feeling he thanked us as Americans for this expression of care. Such foreign aid is all well and good, and a step in the right direction, but obviously this is not enough. Simply giving people things outright does not get to the root of the problem of poverty and is no lasting solution. Somehow we must give them the tools and the power to move on their own--to help them

help themselves. The agricultural missionary on our Baptist farm in Israel is a prophetic symbol of what needs to be done. This calls for imagination and a degree of involvement beyond anything we have done before. But what happens to the rising hungry masses must make a difference to us--as it surely does to our God.

Again, the Church must throw herself afresh into the surging currents of racial conflict. Here is perhaps the most crucial need of the moment. As all people become increasingly color-conscious, all eyes are on America to see what can be done in "the land of the free." Needless to say, this is the number one American news story overseas. At places where we could hear nothing else about the United States, we heard about Harlem and Rochester and Mississippi. To our credit it must be said that America is dealing directly with the problem, and this is appreciated. But the outcome of all this is being awaited almost breathlessly around the globe. If America can show the way for men of different races to live together in law and love, it could be a breakthrough for one of humanity's deepest problems. In this light, how important it is that the Church of Him who loves the whole world leads the way. This is what is expected of us, as is illustrated by an experience of one of our Southern Baptist missionaries. Her maid, a Japanese woman, had been reading about St. Augustine, Florida, and in talking about it she said: "There must be no churches of the loving Saviour in Florida." The missionary told me of her inner dilemma: should she tell this one the truth or not? You see, the world expects more of Christianity, and well it should. Here is a worldwide problem to which every one of us can make a contribution. We have little control over issues like nuclear disarmament or foreign policy, but we can throw our energies into the most important of all races: the white man learning to love before the non-whites learn to hate.

Then, too, there is much we can do in the religious realm. This church has always been deeply enmeshed in world missions. Everywhere I went there was someone who had been touched by Crescent Hill. And I pray we can increase this participation by every means available--our money, our children, our prayers, our concern.

In addition, however, we need to give our best imagination as to how the mission of the Church can be fulfilled. Everywhere I went, the question of methodology was raised. We are agreed on what we want to do--win men to faith in Christ. But how to do this becomes the real question. All Christians need to address themselves to this problem. For this new day the Church must find new ways to do its work. Every experiment we conduct here and find relevant is that much contributed to the world mission task.

Whatever form this assumes, I am convinced from this trip that Christianity must be demonstrated before it is declared. Being must precede saying. It seems we have proclaimed verbally more than we have produced concretely. It is not enough to announce: "Christ is the answer." We must prove this by living example. And for all the heroic sacrifices of many missionaries, there is still a massive vacuum at this point.

I was made aware of this, paradoxically enough, in one of the most sacred spots on earth, the hill of Golgotha and the garden of the resurrection tomb. On these historic sites a massive church has been built, called the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Our guide showed us through it, and told us that the keys to the church were controlled by a Moslem. When we asked why, he said that various Christian denominations had fought over it so much that this seemed the only solution. He spoke of

having seen fights break out in the church when one group would try to pray in another's section. He concluded by saying: "We have too much religion here, but no peace." Those words echoed in my mind long after, and I realized what an ineffective witness this was to the Prince of Peace. We are going to have to do better than has been done in the past. I believe God was in Christ, reconciling the whole world to Himself and men to each other. But for Him to finish that work, the Church must embody that Reality, not just invoke that Name.

Yes, I returned to this pulpit a sadder and more disturbed person, yet at the same time a more committed follower of Jesus Christ. I shall never be the same because of this trip. It produced a crisis of conscience, but also a challenge to commitment. And deeper than all my fears is a rock-ribbed faith that Jesus was and is the Saviour of this world. What He is seems to me to be precisely what this planet needs.

I was reminded of this faith as we visited a famous mosque in Cairo, Egypt. Our guide wanted to demonstrate the vastness of the great dome above us, so he called out and his voice echoed for several seconds. This action recalled to my memory the story of a Christian missionary and his little son who went once to visit such a mosque, and while they were there, the priest issued the traditional Moslem call to prayer. He cried: "Let every knee be bowed to Allah, the only true God, and to Mohammed, who is his prophet." Such words stung the sensitive conscience of the missionary, and forgetting where he was, he put his hand to his lips and cried: "Let every knee be bowed to Jesus Christ; He is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords." As the words went forth, they echoed again and again, just as our guide's voice: "King of Kings and Lord of Lords...King of Kings and Lord of Lords...King of Kings and Lord of Lords." The little son, standing beside his father, looked up in amazement and said: "Daddy, they can't stop it, can they?" And the father said: "No, son, they can't; because He is King of Kings and Lord of Lords."

This I believe! May God help us to establish this faith in every place, until the knowledge of Christ shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea!