

Christianity Is an Experience to Be Enjoyed

by James Blaine Chapman

The sermon emphasizes that Christianity is a joyful experience rooted in personal transformation and genuine faith in God.

Scripture: Psalm 34:8, Matthew 5:20, John 3:3, Acts 9:1, 2 Corinthians 5:17, 2 Corinthians 6:2, Ephesians 2:8, Philippians 1:21

Topics: "Christian Experience", "Spiritual Transformation"

Description

James Blaine Chapman emphasizes the importance of going beyond mere doctrine and ethical conduct to experience Christianity fully. He distinguishes between doctrine, which describes the way to God, and experience, which is the personal result of attempting to walk that road. Chapman illustrates through biblical examples like the Pharisees, Nicodemus, Paul, and John Wesley that true Christianity involves inner conscious experience and a radical change of heart, not just orthodox beliefs and commendable conduct. He concludes by urging listeners to seek a genuine Christian experience, emphasizing the necessity of faith, inner power, and a life centered on Christ.

Transcript

3. But the house has not yet been fully described. We came up to the front of the house in the doctrinal approach. We have viewed the building from the side in thinking of ethical life and practical good conduct. But we must yet go inside and behold the arrangement and observe the furnishings before our description is complete, for Christianity is an experience to be enjoyed.

Perhaps our word experience is not quite definite enough to express the idea. Our reference is to conscious experience. In the wider sense, all life is experience, and in this sense experience may be predominantly either enjoyment or suffering. But in the narrow sense in which we speak, we mean the knowledge of God and of the realities of the spiritual life. And in this sphere we are justified, I think, in speaking of it as all joy.

Boreham remarks that there is a wide difference between biography and autobiography. The first, he thinks, is a description of the temple from the outside, and the other a description of the same temple from the inside. He thinks, therefore, that no one should start his autobiography by saying, "I was born," for being born and living through infancy are not any part of one's conscious experience. The autobiography should begin where the recollection of conscious experience begins, and should even then have little to say about outside details. The real object of an autobiography should be to describe life in terms of the

impressions it makes upon the "man on the inside." How did the matter seem to you? Autobiography is answering this question.

Some time ago a minister was appointed to write a paper on, "How I Prepare to Preach." In his prelude he admitted he would much prefer to write on, "How I Ought to Prepare to Preach," for, he said he had some very definite ideas as to how this work of preparation should be carried on, but he did not have such a good testimony as to the manner in which he actually did it. Now this is the distinction we should make between doctrine and experience: doctrine describes the way to God as it is supposed to be, and no doubt it does contain a correct general description of the road. But experience is the detailed and personal result of my attempt or your attempt to travel that road.

And as to the relation between Christian life and Christian experience: the life is a result or product of the experience, if it is real; and, if it is not real, then life is just an imitation of results, for the true does not actually exist. If a man lives a good life we accept him as a good man. If later it is discovered that his manners were assumed, then we revise our appraisal and conclude that he was just imitating good people, and not, as we supposed, living out the principles which were ingrained in his heart. This is why we say we are not saved by good works, but are saved to good works. This is in explanation of Jesus' method of making the tree good that the fruit may also be good.

Really, we have come now to the essential content in our answer to the question, What is it to be a Christian? We reject as false the saying, "No matter what a man believes, just so he is honest in it," for we know a man's doctrine springs out of the man's heart and practices, and that, in turn, his state and practice are affected by what he believes. Still just being orthodox in doctrine does not make a man right in the inner springs of his thoughts, feelings, tempers, and ambitions. We reject the saying, "If he does right, he is right," as false also, for we know now that a man can imitate good conduct while restraining bad motives. But to be a Christian means to be sound in doctrine, commendable in conduct, and right and clean in motive.

The Pharisees were orthodox in doctrine and commendable in conduct, according to the standards of their times. But Jesus called them hypocrites. This did not mean that they were necessarily insincere, but it did mean they were confined in their righteousness to doctrine and practice. The word hypocrite was the word by which the Greeks described the actor on the stage, whose very ability to instruct and entertain depended upon his playing a part that was not his own. And Jesus said to all, "Except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5: 20). This did not mean that there was no single individual Pharisee anywhere who was right, but it did mean that one would have to have more righteousness than the Pharisees demanded or professed in order to be saved. The Pharisees were able to pass on doctrine and conduct, but they were void of inner conscious experience, and one must have that inner experience to be saved.

It was the same story with Nicodemus. He was an orthodox man of approved conduct. But to him Jesus said, "Ye must be born again." He was all right in mind and in expression, but he was wanting in the essential condition of his heart. He was depending on externals, but he was directed to make sure his heart was right.

It was this same way with Paul. He was a pedigreed Pharisee, and yet he was not saved until he met Christ that day on the road to Damascus and became the subject of an inner, radical change which made him instantly new. When he came to state his case before King Agrippa, he did not talk much of doctrine

and commendable conduct, but hastened to his Damascus road experience, and to deductions from the change which he testified had its beginning there.

It was like this with John Bunyan, the tinker, who spent two years trying to ""attain" peace with God, and then threw himself upon the mercy of God in prayer and faith and ""obtained" in two seconds what he could not ""attain" in two years.

It was the same way with John Wesley. He had organized his Holy Club while yet a student at Oxford, and he had spent three years trying to convert the Indians in Georgia. Then he sat in a little Moravian meeting in Aldersgate Street, London, listening to one read Luther's preface to the Book of Romans, in which the place of faith as the condition of our justification was being described. And there, about nine o'clock in the evening, Wesley suddenly felt his heart ""strangely warmed," and felt that he did really trust Christ and that he did now receive grace to love Him with all his heart.

Charles H. Spurgeon, while as yet a lad, had a long, fierce struggle in his effort to become a real Christian. But he sat one damp morning in a Primitive Methodist chapel and heard a poor layman try to explain and apply the words of the prophet, ""Look unto me, all ye ends of the earth, and be ye saved; for I am God and besides me there is none other." The simplicity of the exhortation to simply ""look and live" reached the heart of the earnest youth, and he did trust Christ, and went away that morning with the assurance of acceptance with God in his heart.

Although it is a far step from these notables to the humble writer of these words, I am happy to say it was like this with me. I did not have the early Christian education that is the fortunate heritage of many. Yet the Spirit of God wrought upon my heart when I was a child of nine. At that time I prayed repeatedly, but without faith and assurance. Again when I was fifteen the Spirit came in renewed ministry to my poor, darkened heart, and in the midst of more favorable surroundings, I prayed and confessed my sins to Christ. It has often seemed to me that I stood at last on the edge of a precipice, and that I was being urged both from without and from within to step off upon the unknown. I knew that to draw back was to enter again into the meshes of menace and condemnation, but to step off seemed to me to be an unusual risk. There seemed to me to be an urge to say, ""I am saved," when as yet I was not conscious of any change. But at long last, I did step out and trust Him with the challenging affirmation, ""I believe He saves me now." I had feared there might be but the sustaining confidence of my own choice to assure me and bear me up. However, I found the everlasting arms were beneath me the moment I stepped off that precipice, and in the instant, I had the knowledge and assurance that I was accepted of God.

I do not now speak as a novice, for more than forty-one years have passed since that night when I looked to Christ in faith for salvation, and I sit here today a man of fifty-six, the father of seven, the grandfather of five, bereft of two children and my wife of thirty-seven years companionship, and yet I assert and affirm that I was definitely converted to God on that night more than forty-one years ago; and, best of all, there is a present assurance of acceptance which results in inner peace.

I have been speaking of minimums all along. I well know that the true Christian grows in both grace and knowledge. Therefore, the mature Christian will have a creed much longer than the minimum statement with which he started. He will bring his life more and more into conformity with the life of Christ and the standards of approved Christian living. And likewise he will find new things in the inner experience in the things of God. I have found such things myself. Since being born of the Spirit, I have been blessedly filled with the Spirit, as an epochal experience. Upon the condition of full consecration to God, I have obtained

the fullness of His love, and I am sure such an experience is the heritage of all who have been born again. Within the temple of His grace there are arrangements and furnishings in keeping with the purpose and use of the place, so that one who has come inside the house is bound to say of this as the queen of Sheba did of Solomon's glory, ""The half was not told me."

And now, being a preacher of the old school, I cannot well close without an exhortation, because the Christian doctrines are true, they welcome scrutiny. If you are unconvinced, ""Come now, let us reason together." The evidences of the truth of our holy religion, like the evidences of truth in all the realm of God's world are of such a nature that they must be sought out to be known. But when sought out, they are convincing. Not so, convincing as to compel a conclusion, for salvation involves the will. But so convincing as to warrant the placing of the will over on the side of the good, and with this the balance turns in favor of faith; and faith, true faith, will bring assurance.

There is no good life but the Christian life. Those who say that goodness is an abstraction are both uninformed and inexperienced. We do not do what we know we ought to do. We do what we desire to do. Therefore, knowledge alone will not save. Education and goodness are not identical. We need grace to purify our affections, as well as light to make clear our pathway. Other religions have their commendable moral maxims. But only the gospel of Christ gives power to do what is required to be done. Others may have light, but grace comes alone through Christ. Others may know the struggle to be delivered from the body of sin, but this deliverance comes only through the blood of Christ and by the power of His Spirit.

Telling a man to live right and yet giving him no inner power to do it, is like telling a man how to get rich by the proper use of a million dollars, but suggesting no way for him to get that million dollars so he can get started. Only born again people can live the new life. The demands of the new life are unadapted to the old affections.

All through these pages we have kept the metaphor of a house before us. We have suggested that doctrine may be like the approach to the front of the building. Life and conduct we have likened to an approach from one side. Experience we have likened to the inside of the house. There is the story of a wealthy man who built a home for his family, making every appointment as complete and convenient as possible. On the day when the family came to inspect and move into the new quarters, the husband and father took his wife and children all through the house, and pointed out to them the order and purpose of all he had done. But at the end he brought a little ark made of fine, perfumed, imported wood. ""This," said he, ""represents religion, and I have not, decided where to place it. I shall be glad for suggestions and advice." ""Oh," exclaimed the grown daughter, ""place it in the music room. Religion is a matter for the soul and heart, and its place is in the midst of poetry and music." "Place it in the library," said the law student son. ""Religion is for the intellect, and its place is among the books." "Find it a place in the kitchen," said the mother, ""religion is practical and its place is amidst labor and useful occupation." The little child, a girl of three or four, was too young to make suggestions, but the father said, "I have read somewhere that 'a little child shall lead them,' so we will give the ark to the little one and let her decide where it should go." The little one held the box for a moment and then went over and cast it into the fire on the open grate. The mother and children were horrified, but the father said, ""Let it be. This was our method of deciding, and we must abide by the results." And as the ark burned on the grate its expensive wood sent forth a sweet perfume that entered the conservatory, the library, the kitchen, and all the rooms of the house, and the father said, ""That is it. Religion belongs in all the rooms. There is no place where it is to be barred out."

Our lives are that house. There is no justification for any phase of life apart from God. His presence should pervade it all.

Paul said, "To me to live is Christ, to die is gain." That is the only premise upon which such a conclusion can be worked out. Suppose we say, "To me to live is gain"; then surely to die is loss. If to me to live is pleasure, to die is pain. If to live is fame, to die is to perish. If to live is anything but Christ then death will interfere. But if to live is Christ, then to die is just to go on living in circumstances better than any we have had before.

What is it to be a Christian? Why, to be a Christian is to find the purpose of life, victory in death, and abundant life forever beyond the grave. Are you a Christian? Perhaps you stop just with saying you are not opposed to Christianity. Perhaps you list yourself with King Agrippa as being "almost persuaded." But I call upon you to be altogether persuaded. I call upon you to repent and believe the gospel. I call upon you to make Jesus Christ your pattern and to direct your life after His example. Yea, more than even all these, I call upon you to imitate David by taking the cup of salvation and calling upon the name of the Lord. I call upon you to come to Christ today in prayer and confession and faith. I call upon you to persist in your quest until light breaks in on your darkness, and you obtain in your own heart pardon and peace and blessed assurance. There is reality in the Christian experience, and none of us should be content to stop short of it. "Behold, now is the accepted time. Behold, now is the day of salvation."

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