

The Church I Found and How I Found It!

by Robert H. Boll

Robert H. Boll shares his journey to understanding true Christianity, emphasizing personal responsibility, the rejection of human authority, and the importance of unity based on Scripture.

Scripture: Matthew 7:24, Matthew 23:8, Romans 14:4, 1 Corinthians 1:10, Galatians 5:1, Ephesians 4:3, Colossians 3:16, 2 Timothy 3:16, 2 Peter 1:20

Topics: "Personal Faith", "Christian Unity"

Description

Robert H. Boll shares his journey of becoming a Christian, emphasizing the struggle of surrendering deeply ingrained beliefs and teachings to embrace a simple, personal relationship with God. Through encounters with certain Christians and the study of scripture, he was led to understand the importance of personal responsibility before God and the need to rely solely on the word of God for guidance. Boll highlights the freedom and individual accountability of a Christian, rejecting the authority of human creeds and emphasizing unity based on the whole counsel of God.

Transcript

When I became a Christian - simply a Christian - it meant to me the surrender of the faith and teaching which was instilled in me from infancy, in which I grew up, and which I still held when I turned my twentieth year. It was a tremendous step for me. If to any such a change would seem easy, with me it came hard. I never would or could have made that turn had not the grace of God wrought wonderfully toward me. Even as it was I was a long time coming. I have nothing to boast of: for reasons known only to Him, God prepared very exceptional opportunities for me. First of all He plucked me out of the old environment; for in my old home I would probably never have given His word any consideration. But neither would the removal from my home and friends, alone, have availed to bring the change. I cleaved to my early teaching wherever I went with no thought but to continue so for ever. It was by God's providence that I met with certain Christians, some of whom took the time and trouble to show me some of the truth. That was another of God's mercies.

Two passages of scripture especially were driven home to my heart in those days, both of which tended to throw me upon my own personal responsibility before God, /4/ and to deprive me of the reliance I had placed upon the honored and trusted instructors of my youth. The first of these scripture was 1 Kings 13 - the story of the unnamed "man of God" from Judah, who came to grief in all good conscience, through accepting the deceitful word of man as a message from God. The other was Matt. 7:24-27, which carried

the assurance that if any man personally, would hear the words of Christ Himself and act upon them, he would be building a rock; and every one doing otherwise would be building upon the sand, and destined to certain ruin.

These two passages shook me greatly. But neither was even this sufficient to set me right. Finally by a certain combination of circumstances which I am again bound to ascribe to God's leading, I was turned to the reading of several religious books, and most especially the Bible - though not with a purpose of seeking the truth. Yet it was that which tipped the scales. Even then, however, I was not sure as to the step to take. I had become acquainted with the "Church of Christ"; and the idea of being simply and only a Christian of the New Testament sort, attracted me. But at that time I looked upon the church of Christ as simply a denomination among other denominations. Its extraordinary claims repelled me rather than otherwise. It seemed to me that it arrogated to itself exclusively a name to which, as I judged, all other denominations /5/ had equal right. The dogmatism and arrogance (as it appeared to me) of their attitude affected me adversely. For a time I felt and spoke cynically of all the religious bodies. Still I was revolving the problem in my mind; and despite my limited understanding, I saw that I had at least the same opportunity of being a simple Christian as had the people of whom I read in the New Testament, and an equal right to belong to the church of Christ in that original and universal sense in which the apostles and all the earliest Christians belonged to it. I also began to understand that such a simple Christian stood responsible to his Lord alone for all his faith and practice; and that therefore the word of God, all of it, and it only, must be his guidance - no man having the right either to limit him therein or to impose on him anything besides; that he was free from all men and from every human yoke. With that conception more or less clearly in mind, and understanding little else, I confessed Christ as my Lord and was buried with Him in baptism. I would say just here that all the years since have but cleared and strengthened this my original understanding of the Christian's position, and for me none other is now possible nor even can be.

THE PREACHER NOT AN AUTHORITY.

How even as a babe in Christ I conceived of the Christian's freedom in personal responsibility to his Lord /6/ - comes back to me in the remembrance of little casual disputes. On one occasion a man said to me, "I know what your people believe on the intermediate state - I heard one of your preachers on it not long ago." "That doesn't signify anything," I answered him; "The preacher you heard may have been right, or may have been wrong. We are not bound to our preachers, nor by anything any man among us may say. Our only appeal is to the word of God." That was a month or so after my baptism: I have had no occasion to alter my position on that matter. To this day I take it that no man or set of men, however learned, venerable, and good, can be authority to a simple Christian. If any man is so scholarly or so deeply versed in the Scriptures, it ought to enable him to point out and set forth that much more clearly what the Scriptures say on any matter in question. If he cannot do that his reputation is vain. It is certain that, for all his reputed knowledge and ability we will not take his word. When he can point out God's word on the matter, so that I myself can see that it is God's word, I accept it - not because that able brother pointed it out, but because it is God's word. To this day in my judgment the consideration that this or that great man taught thus and so, or that the editors of such and such a religious paper stand for this or that, or even that "the brotherhood" believes thus and so - weighs absolutely /7/ nothing so far as the determining of the faith of the humblest Christian is concerned.

By this is not meant that Christians are to show no deference and consideration to the able and worthy teachers among them. Far from it. There are men whose ability and long faithfulness command our fullest respect; whose positions on matters of faith deserve to be weighed and examined with more than common

care and thought. Yet after all that is said, nothing is to be accepted, held, believed, practiced, simply because any man, however good or great, so taught. The simple Christian knows absolutely no father on the earth; nor any Rabbi, Master, or Teacher, save the Lord Jesus Christ alone. (Matt. 23:8-10.)

NO HUMAN CREED, GOOD OR BAD.

Such was my understanding when I became a Christian; and such I conceived to be the position of the one and only church to which I then subscribed or to which I ever expect to belong. To these principles I have never been unfaithful.

On the other hand I do not belong to any "Church of Christ" which stands on any other platform nor do I own any doctrine of any "brotherhood" which narrows down, or superadds to this simple basis of faith any doctrines of men, or any creed formulated by men. As I would not subscribe to a human creed that contained error, or any tenet or article of faith contrary in my judgment to /8/ the word of God - so neither would I subscribe to any man's creed even if that creed contained to the dot all I now believe, and all I understand the Bible to teach. I can accept no human creed, good or bad. The moment a Christian bows to a human creed he ceases to be a simple follower of Christ. An alien authority has intruded between him and his Lord; and his claim to be a member of the church of Christ requires the explanation that he belongs to that particular party which holds to such and such a creed as the authoritative expression of its faith. If a man thus bound to a creed should see occasion (as any living, growing, thinking man must) to correct past views, or to enlarge past conceptions, and to take in new truths from the storehouse of God, he would either have to shut his eyes to the light, or break away from the old creed, and formulate a new one every time he made a step forward. Thus comes the multiplication of sects. But the true Christian is committed simply to the word of God in the sight of the Lord - all of it, and it alone, and that is his ultimate and only standard of truth and doctrine, in which lies boundless scope for his growth and progress, and correction.

THE CHURCH I DIDN'T JOIN.

After all the writer has gone through, would he have to fear that while endeavoring to stand simply as a Christian, and to belong only to the church spoken of in the New /9/ Testament, he might inadvertently have fallen in with a sect which, while calling itself by that good name stands upon something else than the whole inclusive and exclusive basis of the whole word of God? I cannot admit such a thought for a moment. When I say that I stand absolutely and foursquare upon the word of God, all of it and nothing but it - not any creed or theory of any man, either of my own or any other's, and that by the Word and with it I am content to stand or fall - I am declaring the fundamental position of the church of Christ, and of many thousands of simple Christians, my brethren in the Lord. If there be any organization that stands for less or more than this; if there be a party holding articles of faith and tenets of man's deduction and manufacture as a creed and standard of doctrine, written or unwritten - I do not belong to such a party-organization, let its name be what it may. If, for example, there is a body of religionists who, in order to fellowship and unity with them, would demand submission to tenets such as - that Daniel 2:44 was (or was not) fulfilled on Pentecost; that the church is (or is not) the equivalent of the kingdom; or that Christ will not come until the world is converted; or, perhaps, that certain portions of scripture (say, the prophecies) are not to be taught - or if taught not to be insisted on for what they plainly say and mean in a simple, faithful acceptance of the inspired words - if, I say, there were such a body demanding submission /10/ to such or such like articles of faith, on pain of ostracism and excommunication from their brotherhood and fellowship - they do well to count me out; for indeed I belong to no such sect.

But from the people who call themselves simple Christians - with whom I am wholly at one in all understanding of all that is required to make a man a Christian, and in all matters of congregational practice; who stand upon the whole word of God, willing to test all things by that word alone, in brotherly fellowship with all who stand thus upon the same broad (and narrow) basis - from them I would not be severed or distinguished for any consideration, nor for all the world excluded from their Christian fellowship. To that church I belong; of that people I am one, though the very least and unworthiest. Were I cut off from them I should be at a loss indeed for I have no other plea than theirs, and nothing else to preach or teach, nor any sort of distinctive doctrinal principles to found a sect upon, even if I were capable of so evil a thing - which, please God, I am not.

INEVITABLE DIFFERENCES.

Among a free people in the Lord who study and think and grow, differences within certain limits are inevitable. As a matter of fact we have not two mature preachers among us who are agreed on all points, nor even on all important points. /11/ It has been the glory of the church of Christ that its members have been so mutually tolerant on even serious divergences. If the time should come that the church cannot negotiate such differences as, we might say for instance, that concerning the matters of prophecy just now questioned here and there, we may as well quit preaching unity to others, and calling on divided Christendom to "come stand with us" - : the logical outcome of that sort of spirit would be to put every man in a church to himself. Even granted that a man were entirely mistaken in certain mooted questions, if the church could not brook and meet such an exigency in good fellowship and love, then divisions are only a matter of time, and there will be no end to the splits and "wings" and factions, as indeed it has already too plainly begun to turn out in several quarters. It remains to be seen then whether the church is to be dominated by a spirit of intolerance and bigotry, or whether we can stand by one another upon the same platform of truth and brotherly kindness, always proving all things, always holding fast all that is good.

"Let us Have Unity."

It is in the irony of things that so great and good a word as unity should ever be used as the cudgel of sectarian tyranny. Unity, we are told, is precious - therefore leave us undisturbed. Say nothing except what all /12/ of us have always said, lest it cause trouble. We have about all the truth that is essential. What we have not found is not essential. If any man should try to teach anything beyond our acknowledged doctrine; or should dare to differ from anything the brethren have always held and taught or should believe anything which they dispute and resent, let him be anathema; he is a disturber of peace, a disruptor of unity of the church.

Think of it! And if we are to be controlled by that sort of principle, what would in the end be the difference between the "church of Christ" and any other sect? Would not that current accepted doctrine of ours (that must not be interfered with lest unity be disturbed) become the equivalent of a creed - the accepted human standard of doctrine? Will it not finally be left with a few leaders to define and say what this, "our doctrine" really is? Would we not have to ask them what is the proper thing to believe and teach? Will not every teacher and preacher have to set himself square with that standard, or else be stigmatized as a divider and heretic? Just what would be the essential difference between such an arrangement and the common creedal authority, or other forms of ecclesiasticism among the sects of Christendom? Just what would be the distinction, in such a case, between the endorsement bestowed by these leaders in the church of Christ and the "imprimatur" of say, Rome's authority? Clearly no more effective /13/ weapon could be put in the hands of ecclesiastical lords, nor an instrument of religious tyranny more potent than

that false unity plea. Behind it can hide all power of human ecclesiastical domination. Woe to those who do not line up with its demands! What the odium theologicum can accomplish of branding and ostracism such unity advocates can vent upon the heads of all who will not unconditionally submit to them and to their creed. And where is the freedom wherewith Christ has set us free? And where each Christian's individual and inalienable right to search and find, to believe and speak, to prove and practice his Master's word? Surely those who subscribe to any doctrinal control other than the whole counsel of God forfeit their name as simple Christians; and the church that adopts a human standard of doctrine, whatever it is, is in honor bound to wear a corresponding human name.

UNITY IS PRECIOUS.

Now as for unity - unity is precious. And it is not possible for us to have unity and fellowship in the Lord, except we be agreed in Scripture teaching of the things that make a man a Christian - the all inclusive confession; the gospel of Christ; the obedience of faith. In order to worship we must be at one as to congregational practice, and must therefore stand together upon the simplest New Testament ground. In order to live and work together we must all stand /14/ upon the supreme and sole authority of the word of God.

But within these limits there may be - nay, inevitably there will be much variation in our conception of things - differences due to stages of growth, diligence in study, temperament, development, personal aptitudes - for the truth of God is many-sided and inexhaustible; no man has ever taken in all of it and it takes all the church to get the manifold truth. So long, then, as a man among us stands upon the Rock foundation, holding himself subject to the verdict of the Scriptures, and leaving his teaching subject to each hearer's individual judgment and Bible-taught conscience in the sight of God, no line may be drawn against him. Those who do draw a line against such a man, draw it against themselves.

NO GROUNDS FOR DIVISION.

Nor could any teaching put forth by such a Christian upon these principles justly cause division in the church of Christ. To call in question, to voice dissent, to discuss, to correct one another, if all be done in love is perfectly good and in order; and indeed by this the church grows in knowledge of the truth. But it would be an indictment against a church that any part of the word of God should have to be suppressed. The sectarian spirit only, not the Christian spirit, fears the effect of the truth, or dreads an interference with its creed; and the sectarian spirit alone is unwilling to think, search, /15/ weigh, learn, correct and be corrected.

Unity based upon such concession and suppression, is worthless. If we comply with the demand to conformity once - is it peace and unity? No - only till the next time a man should find or teach something distasteful to the leaders. Then the same trouble would arise again, and another demand for silence and submission would have to be yielded to - and so on till in all points the creed of those human authorities is established. Then we would be united, alas!

As for myself - in the fear of God, in the love of the Lord and the brethren, I beg the privilege to study and teach and preach, as God may give me ability and opportunity, and as faithfully as by His grace I may, the whole counsel of God. For this is my fundamental portion and birthright as a child of God in God's house, the one and only church which the Lord established, the only church of which I am a member and to which I ever intend to belong.

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