



Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, November 29, 1987, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

JUDGES 13:8

“Teach us what we shall do with
the child who shall be born.”

THE INESCAPABLE DECISION

There was a day, so this old writer of the Book of Judges records, when an angel of the Lord visited Manoah and his wife, and told them that the child they were to expect would be a great leader and deliverer of his people. He would ransom Israel from her captivity. He would smash the power of her hereditary enemies, the Philistines. He would be the instrument through whom almighty God would carry out His redeeming strategy.

It was a daunting responsibility to be the parents of such a child. Would God, asked Manoah, give them a special measure of grace and guidance? Would He show them the way to take, and prepare them to receive aright the child whose destiny would be so dramatic? “Teach us what we shall do with the child who shall be born.”

So *Samson* (for that was the child’s name) came into the world, and lived, and loved, and fought, and died, and was gathered to his fathers.

Centuries later the angel of the Lord returned. God was now to send another Deliverer to His people. He, too, would come as a little Child. He, too, would fight and smash the Philistines, and ransom captive Israel; only His Philistines would not be the warring tribe that once bore that name, but rather, the world, the flesh and the devil—those ruthless forces of sin that rot man’s soul, and bring his proud empires to the dust.

It was an amazing divine strategy that laid the Christ Child upon the doorstep of the world’s heart—and what an awesome responsibility for those who had to receive such a gift into their midst. For 2,000 years now, the character of every person and nation, every society and culture, has been revealed by their attitude to the Babe of Bethlehem. They may not realize it, but it is indeed the critical, decisive question: “What shall we do with the Child Who shall be born?”

And still at Christmas He comes again, the Holy Child of Bethlehem; and still the challenge is renewed. It is a momentous responsibility for our generation to face the fact of Christ, and to determine its attitude to “God’s unspeakable Gift.”

Historically there have been three answers to the question. When Jesus first came to earth, three conflicting attitudes emerged, and these are as characteristic of modern man and society as they were of the men of Bethlehem and Jerusalem long ago.

“What shall we do with the Child Who shall be born?”

1. King Herod answered it. “There is not room for both of us in the same world. Therefore, let Him die while His empire is still a dream. Let Him be destroyed.” So Herod growled out a command, and all the little Bethlehem children of two years of age and under were put to the sword.

Now Herod’s answer, **the answer of hostility**, is being given still. It is as true today as it was then that a secularized society, a pagan culture, an unregenerate human heart know instinctively that Christ challenges all their basic principles. He menaces their way of life, and so they denounce Him. “We will not have this Man to reign over us,” they say. “Let Him and His Kingdom be destroyed!”

Let us be under no illusion. This is the assault which here, in the U.S.A., goes under the name of secular humanism—a militant philosophy that scoffs at the very idea of God, because man is quite capable of determining and controlling his own destiny. And then, of course, for 70 years Communism has been the sworn enemy of religion, and 800 million people now march under the flag which bears the hammer and sickle.

But there is also a more personal issue here, for many of us have fought against Christ without knowing we were doing it. “What shall we do with the Child Who shall be born?” We would deny that we have ever, for a single moment, been hostile to Christ. We would protest hotly against any such suggestion. But the blunt truth is - we have all been hostile toward Him times without number. What about that occasion when God’s clear guidance came to you, and you knew without any shadow of doubt what He wanted you to do; and you blew it; you deliberately turned away and chose another course of your own choosing? Or there was that time when you found yourself in a situation where you knew you should take your stand, and show your colors, and at all costs be loyal to Christ; but through sheer cowardice, you refused. Think of the places you have gone where you knew Christ would not go with you, the things you have said and done which you knew must make His heart bleed. Think of the times you have done violence to your conscience, and smothered, momentarily at least, the still small voice of God. Are these not times when you have stood with the enemy, and given your judgment against Christ? “If then the light within you is darkness, how great is that darkness!” (Matthew 6:23).

“What shall we do with the Child Who shall be born?”

There is a second answer to our question:

2. The Bethlehem innkeeper answered it. His answer was different. “What shall we do with the Child?”—why—nothing! “My house is crowded, my hands are full, my mind is preoccupied. It is really no concern of mine. They can take their chance outside—in the stable.” If Herod’s answer was the answer of hostility, this was **the answer of indifference**. Perhaps we Christians are partly to blame for the fact that the world, by and large, treats our Lord with unconcealed indifference. Perhaps a conventional religion, devoid of zeal and glow and power and certainty and joy has given the impression that Christ makes very little difference after all. Perhaps our petty concern for trivialities, our small-mindedness, our nonchalance has seemed to

suggest that the faith itself is something petty and trivial and irrelevant.

“These Christians,” growled Nietzsche, the German philosopher, “these Christians must show me that they are redeemed before I will believe in their Redeemer.” Is it not time that you and I and all of us began to pray with passion and with penitence, “Oh God, before it is too late, forgive us for our lukewarmness and inconsistency, and set us on fire for Christ!”

But surely the main reason for the world’s indifference is something else. When people ignore Christ today, it is usually because, like the Bethlehem innkeeper, they cannot find room for Him. All the accommodation in the house of life is already occupied by other crowding interests. It is not that people are defiantly anti-religious—far from it—it is simply that they haven’t time for that kind of thing; and besides, they believe they can get along very well without the things of God.

Listen to these sentences from an incisive *Reader’s Digest* article: “By the 20th century U.S. public education could boast of remarkable achievements. It had homogenized waves of immigrants, and inculcated morality without religious affiliation...” There you have the old heresy that you can be good without God. It is a heresy and a lie, because the morals of this nation, as of every civilized nation on earth, are the end product of its religious heritage. You remember the simple equation:

$$\text{GOOD} - \text{GOD} = 0$$

You can’t do what is right if you don’t believe what is right. Belief determines behavior. If a young person is taught today that basically he is an animal, is it any wonder that he acts like one?

“What shall we do with the Child Who shall be born?”

Some may cry, “Crown Him Lord of all!” Others may shout, “Away with Him! Crucify Him!” But far more there are who prefer the middle way, “Let Him be ignored!”

I wonder, does Christ get His rightful place in our lives—in your life and mine? Or are these lives of ours cluttered up with a lot of interests and preoccupations, all of which are good and legitimate, but which really don’t matter much at all, things which will fade to ashes in the light of eternity? Life is so busy, so hectic; we have so many irons in the fire that there is little or no room for the Highest—He is just crowded out.

Jenny Lind, the world-famous opera singer, known in her day as “The Swedish Nightingale,” gave up the stage when she was 29 years of age and at the very zenith of her career. One mid-summer evening shortly afterwards, she was entertaining a friend who said to her, “Miss Lind, what was it that prompted you to give up such a lucrative career?” to which she replied, “Because I had too little time for my Bible,” and pointing through the open window to the gorgeous sunset, “and no time at all for that!”

The Bible and the sunset—eternal truth and eternal beauty. How much time do we give to these basic realities? How much time did you give during the past week to Bible reading and

prayer? Keep a daily log for a week of the time you spend each day in these sacred exercises, and you may receive a nasty jolt as you realize how impoverished your devotional life really is. The Shorter Catechism reminds us that our chief aim in life should be to “glorify God and to enjoy Him forever.” To get to know Christ better, so that you may prepare your soul to spend eternity in God’s nearer presence—what could better occupy our time than that?

And again, how much really prime time did you devote to your family and to the cementing of family relationships during the past week? Beware lest the good become the enemy of the best! Beware lest your life become so crowded with commendable but secondary interests that the most important things become virtually ignored.

So we reach the third and final answer.

“What shall we do with the Child Who shall be born?”

3. Simeon in the Temple answered it. When Joseph and Mary brought their little Child on the day of His dedication, this God-fearing old priest in the Temple, by some inner vision, knew and hailed Him and welcomed Him to his arms! As the old man cradled the heaven-sent Messiah in his arms, with a radiant smile upon his face he exclaimed, “Now my eyes have seen Your salvation; You (little One) are a light to lighten the nations; You are the glory of Your people Israel!” (Luke 2:30-32).

And so, over against Herod’s answer of hostility, and the innkeeper’s answer of indifference stands Simeon’s **answer of commitment**. And this answer is being given still -- I pray God it may be given here today! It is all wrong that membership in the Body of Christ should sometimes carry with it so little sense of urgent personal obligation on the part of many professing Christians. It is all wrong that anyone who claims Christ as Lord and Master should not be vitally interested, for example, in overseas missions, and the millions the world over who have never yet heard of the Saviour. So many good folk are just not interested. They are not into their faith with a passion to share Christ and spread the Kingdom. They are lukewarm.

And to bring this home to ourselves—it is all wrong that we should go on, perhaps to the end of life, being content with the pitiful half-commitments of a conventional “churchianity,” when, all the while, our blessed Lord is waiting to shake and redeem the world through men and women who are wholly committed and surrendered to His will, and who are using their spiritual gifts for the advancement of the Saviour’s Kingdom! At this critical hour in world history, it is not a lukewarm, half-hearted discipleship that is needed. It is a spirit possessed and controlled completely by Christ!

As Herbert Butterfield, the Cambridge historian, has put it in his book *Christianity and History*, “It needs only a comparatively small number of Communists to upset a state, because of their intense purposefulness. So in like manner, it needs only a comparatively small number of this kind of Christians to operate as a leaven that leavens the whole lump.”

“Give me,” cried John Wesley, “give me a hundred men who fear nothing but sin, and love

nothing but God, and I will shake the gates of hell!”

“What shall we do with the Child Who shall be born?”

We are within sight of Christmas. Why not settle this now? Simeon took the Child into his arms. Will you not do the same? There are none of us who have been as whole-hearted in our allegiance as we might have been. This Christmas is our heaven-sent opportunity to give ourselves over to Christ and to a dying world.

Will you give Him, in glad and full commitment, a cradle and a throne?

“Were the whole realm of nature mine,
That were an offering far too small;
Love so amazing, so divine,
Demands my soul, my life, my all!”

AMEN.