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Veil of the Bearded and Sandaled One

As I read the letters of the New Testament I see a tremendous difference between the Christ whom Paul presented to the world and the Christ the church presents today.

Paul said, "Therefore from now on we recognize no man according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer" (II Corinthians 5:16).

When he preached the Gospel, he didn't present the Christ of the four Gospels.

You never find him talking about the Samaritan woman, the feeding of the 5,000, or the raising of J aims' daughter. Instead, he proclaimed the ascended Christ who is alive today, to whom every knee will ultimately bow and every tongue confess that He is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Often when the church preaches the Gospel, it presents the Christ of the Gospels—the Christ with a beard and sandals, who walked on the waters of the sea of Galilee, who cursed the fig tree and who healed the ten lepers.

But the emphasis in the primitive church was entirely different.

Listen to what the author of Hebrews wrote: "Therefore, brethren, since we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by the new and living way which He in-

augurated for us through the curtain, that is, through His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water" (Hebrews 10:19-22).

The life that Jesus lived on earth was to open up a whole new relationship with God for us. It was so that we could know Him as He is now, in a living relationship that is ever fresh. His earthly life was just the gateway to the new way in which we now can experience Him.

So I have asked myself many times, "Why does the church usually present the Christ of the Gospels, instead of the Christ of today?"

The Christ whom Paul preached said at the time of His departure, "Lo, I am with you always, even until the end of the age."

That Christ is eternal, and He is still with us today! He lived before He came to earth, and He is living right now, long after His ascension to heaven.

Why then do we who live in the 1980s insist on presenting to the world the historical Jesus of almost 2,000 years ago? Why is it that almost every time we preach, it is about this Jesus of the past?

The picture of Jesus in the flesh is actually the poorest picture of our Lord. The Bible says of those 33 years when He was on earth that Christ was made of "no reputation."

Paul said of Jesus' earthly life that though He was inherently God, He did not count equality with God something to be grasped but "emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:5-11). He made Himself of no reputation for 33 years. The Spanish Bible says, "Made Himself nothing."

In what role did people know Him on earth?

Today He has a "name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow." But on earth He was known simply as a carpenter. The eternal, glorious Christ

was made like one of us, like a servant, like nothing.

The Christ who was made of no reputation "humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross." He not only humbled Himself to live among men, He was born in a manger like an animal. He spent His life going among sinners—publicans and prostitutes. Then He was crucified as the worst kind of criminal, and even buried in a borrowed tomb!

Jesus on earth was the bearded One in sandals and robes—a man of no reputation. So it is little wonder we are very impressed by some of the things which He did, which to us seem very great.

We are very impressed by Jesus' power when He cursed the fig tree and it died. But really, what is it for the One who created the entire Garden of Eden to curse a fig tree? It is no great feat.

You can imagine the angels up there in heaven teasing Him about cursing the fig tree. "Come on, was cursing the fig tree all You could think of doing?" To them, it was nothing. But of course, it is a great thing for us.

He also stilled the waters of the Sea of Galilee. The Jewish people call it a "sea" because it is the only body of sweet water in the country. Actually, it is just a small lake. But what is it for the creator of the galaxies to still the waters of a lake? If you have a glass of water in your hand and you create a storm in the glass, you can still it in a minute—in a few seconds, even. Well, it was no great thing for Christ to do that with the Sea of Galilee. But we are terribly impressed!

Why are we so impressed?

Because we know Jesus after the flesh. We see Him from the vantage of fleshly human beings, not from the vantage of spirit. For those 33 years He gave up His glory and became like one of us—a baby, a carpenter, a preacher. Yet what are 33 years compared with eternity? You might as well ask, what are 33 cents to a billionaire?

But it seems that the only thing we know of Christ is those

33 years. All of our Sunday School material is based on those years. I was practically born in the church. My mother committed her life to Christ before I was born. So as far back as I can remember, I went to Sunday School. I was there every week, and I heard the same material many times over.

Every five years the curriculum was completed and again I would hear the same teachings. I knew every lesson that was going to be given, and they were all about Jesus' 33 years of humiliation.

It's the same with the church calendar.

We start with Christmas. Then comes the story of the 12-year-old boy. Then there is His baptism, the temptation, the parables and miracles, and lastly the crucifixion, resurrection and ascension. Then we go back to Christmas, the 12-year-old boy, the baptism, the temptation, the miracles, the crucifixion, the resurrection, the ascension...and back to Christmas again.

Then I went to the seminary.

There, they had a subject called the life of Christ. Do you know where it started? In the manger. And do you know where it finished? At the ascension. And they called it the life of Christ! It may be 33 years of the life of Christ, but it is not the life of Christ.

Why did Paul tell the Corinthians that he wasn't too concerned with knowing the historical Jesus? It was because there was a problem in the Corinthian church.

Paul was the first one to go to the city of Corinth with the message of salvation. After he left, Apollos visited there. Now Apollos was a tremendous preacher. Many of the people gravitated to him above Paul because he was so eloquent. But after him Peter went there, and he too had a nice ministry.

Later, one group in the church said, "We prefer Paul." Before long there was a division, because the fans of Apollos and the fans of Peter disagreed with the fans of Paul. This was all in the same church! In the same body there were fans

of three different men.

That kind of division occurs among babies, Paul told them. Perhaps he would have said that many of us today haven't even been bom, because we can't even go to the same service! At least they were all in the same church.

"I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, I am of Peter." Perhaps the senior people in the church were fans of Paul, because when Paul arrived in the city there were no believers there at all. He had to work making tents to sustain himself. So they remembered Paul.

The young people, on the other hand, were probably the fans of Apollos because he had an intellectual capacity and charismatic speaking ability that could convince anybody. When Apollos preached, people wept.

Peter was different again. Perhaps he appealed more to the women. Not because he was good-looking, but because of his special ministry. He was an old man by this time, but he was one of the three closest apostles to the Lord Jesus when He was on earth. The Lord Jesus with a beard and sandals.

So when Peter was coming to Corinth they announced in the church, "One of the twelve is coming... one who walked and talked with Jesus. One who traveled with Him." Needless to say, the place was packed when Peter came.

Peter didn't need to prepare any of his sermons. He just told stories about Jesus. The New Testament hadn't been written yet—the life of Jesus that we read of in the Gospels wasn't yet on paper. So Peter could give people firsthand facts that nobody knew anything about.

"Dear brothers and sisters, as you know I am one of the twelve," Peter said. "I was actually one of the three closest ones. Now, every time the three closest apostles are named, we are named in the same order—Peter, James and John... Not without reason, I say this—just to show you how close I was to Jesus.

"We were walking down the street one day. We had been preaching and healing the sick the whole day, and we were re-

turning to the city in the evening. The Lord said to me, 'Peter, I am hungry.' You can imagine how I felt! I looked around to see if anybody had any food, but nobody had anything left. We had eaten everything we had brought with us. But looking around I saw a fig tree ahead of us, and I knew He loved figs.

" 'Oh,' I said, 'a fig tree.' But when we got to the tree, there wasn't one fig on it for the Master. Do you know what He did?

"No, He didn't put figs on the tree. He cursed the fig tree and the fig tree dried up in front of these two eyes!

"What power!

"Another day we were crossing the Sea of Galilee, and I said to Jesus (you know, we were very close), 'Jesus, we know how to cross the sea. We are fishermen. You sleep, because You have worked very hard.' I was very concerned for Him. So He listened to me and took my advice.

"Jesus was asleep and we were out in the middle of the sea when a storm came up. The wind blew so hard and the waves raged against our ship, and we thought we were all going to die. So I went to shake Jesus awake. 'Lord, wake up,' I said frantically. 'We are sinking.'

"So He stood up, and leaning on my shoulder—/ can still feel the touch—He spoke to the winds and to the waters. And in a second the sea was calm and still."

Oh, how that touched people. They started to weep. What a miracle, what power!

Somewhere in the church somebody said to the brother sitting next to him, "Listen, why didn't Paul tell us these things? He never said anything about this."

"Be quiet, I want to listen," this brother said. "It was because Paul was not with Jesus. He was converted much later and never saw the Lord."

Peter continued. "Then there was the time when He healed Bartimaeus, the blind man—"

"Look," this brother persisted, "to be an apostle,

shouldn't a person have seen Jesus?"

"Yes."

"But you said that Paul was not with Jesus."

"Shut up and listen."

Meantime, Peter continues: "Now the Samaritan woman...."

"I don't believe that Paul is an apostle, because if he is an apostle he should have been with Jesus. This is an apostle—listen to what he is telling us!"

By now Peter was talking about the ten lepers. And the gossip had started in the church. Perhaps Paul was not an apostle since he had not been with Jesus, and one of the requirements of an apostle was to have known Jesus in person. But Peter, ah—he was an apostle!

The gossip began to filter back to Paul. What reached his ears concerned him, because like you and me he was subject to moments of anxiety. So he took a pen and wrote a letter to the Corinthians.

"From here on I know no man after the flesh," Paul said to them. He meant, "It doesn't matter that you are a doctor or an apostle. The thing that counts is your relationship with Christ, not your title."

If Paul had Peter in mind when he spoke of those who knew Christ according to the flesh, he didn't mean that Peter did not have a relationship with Christ. No, he loved Peter and respected him. Admittedly he once rebuked him in front of everybody. But he wasn't trying to put Peter down when he spoke of not being concerned about Christ in the flesh.

What Paul was getting at is that it wouldn't have mattered even if he had known Christ after the flesh—if he had been there along with Peter, James and John. "I would prefer to know Him as I now know Him," he was saying.

Do you know how Paul knew Jesus?

The first time Saul, as his name was then, saw Jesus, he al-

most died. His first encounter with Him was on the way to Damascus. The Lord opened up a window in heaven. But He was a little careless. He let too much of His glory come through, and it almost killed Paul. Paul fell from his horse and was blind for the next three days.

Later, Paul was taken up to the third heaven, to the central headquarters of the kingdom of God.

At that time he had an interview with Christ. We don't know how long this encounter took; there may have been several of them over a period of months or even years. This took place after he fled from Damascus. We don't read anything about him for many years, until the time Barnabas went to look for him in the town in which he had been born and brought him down to Antioch. But we know that he was two or three years in the wilderness, praying.

When Paul was caught up into heaven he spoke with Christ.

But not with the bearded Jesus with sandals. This was the glorious, eternal Christ. Paul saw Him in His eternal state. And this was better than to have known Him in the flesh, in the time of His humiliation, like Peter knew Him.

Peter had difficulty with some of the things Paul wrote.

"Be careful when you read the letters of Paul," he wrote one time, "because they have some very difficult concepts in them." Peter had seen Christ only from the standpoint of His earthly ministry, but Paul had seen Him in glory. So perhaps Paul had a much deeper understanding of the eternal Christ.

Like Paul, I am glad that I got to know Christ as He is now and not as He was on earth. You see, I have one problem less than those who knew Him as a human being. Too great a consciousness of the Christ in the flesh can be a hindrance to knowing Him in the spirit.

Every time those who knew Christ in the flesh prayed, they remembered what He looked like. But Paul didn't have that problem. He knew Christ exactly as He is. And this was to his advantage because for him Christ was more of a living reality than a historical personage.

It is evident when we read the letters of Paul that he never quotes the Gospels once.

For example, he never says, "*Dear Timothy, I am going to explain to you the passage about the Samaritan woman.*" Do you ever read of Paul doing that? Yet we do it all the time.

When we preach the Gospel, how do we do it?

We first preach about the Samaritan woman, the ten lepers, or Zacchaeus. Then we spiritualize those stories and lead into the Gospel.

But Paul didn't do that. He encountered the apostles in Jerusalem for only 15 days following his conversion, so he really didn't know too much about the historical Jesus. He never had the opportunity to sit down and say to someone, "Explain the story of Zacchaeus to me."

If you have knowledge of the historical Jesus alone, it is retrospective knowledge—it is static knowledge.

I remember once I preached a sermon on the Good Samaritan. It was during an evangelistic campaign. I was the teacher of homiletics at our Bible school, and the campaign was taking place in the chapel at the Bible school.

I prepared seven sermons on the Good Samaritan, all taken from the one passage. In each, I spiritualized the various aspects of the story. But the point Jesus was making is, "Now, you go and do the same thing."

When you find someone in need, you help him. But in all of my preaching about the parable I said nothing about that.

Paul didn't preach Christ as I did when I analyzed the story of the Good Samaritan. He didn't present the Christ of the Gospels. He was more interested in the eternal, glorious Christ of the present.

When Jesus comes to our churches, He should be the living, glorified Jesus who is present in our midst today. He is the living head of the church. And He has a great deal to say to us when we are ready to listen.