

## THE GREAT QUESTION<sup>1</sup>

**M**Y TEXT, which I will announce later, is in the form of a question. It was asked hundreds of years ago and has been asked daily by increasing multitudes ever since. At the time it was asked it was answered in various ways. It has been answered differently by different people all down the ages and will doubtless be answered differently in different minds this morning.

Most young people of parts have a hero of some kind. In his lectures on *Heroes and Hero Worship* Thomas Carlyle said: "We all love great men. We love, venerate, and bow down before them. Great men taken up in any way are profitable company. We cannot look upon a great man without profit. You will not grudge to wander in such neighborhood for a while." Modern men are not inclined to hero worship as men were in the days of Thomas Carlyle. However, the study of any great man at any time has a peculiar charm.

Greatness may be found in three different realms; the realm of action; the realm of thought; the realm of character. Lines of demarcation are not easily drawn. These fields necessarily overlap. One may achieve greatness in one of these realms and be deficient in the other two, or he may be great in two and lacking in the third.

In the realm of action Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, Napoleon, Wellington, Washington, and Foch are counted

<sup>1</sup>Baccalaureate sermon of the eighteenth annual commencement of the Rice Institute, delivered by the Reverend Hiram Abiff Boaz, D.D., LL.D., Bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in the Academic Court, at nine o'clock Sunday morning, June 4, 1933.

preëminent. They marshalled great armies, conquered other peoples, and imposed their wills upon multitudes. They have been given large space in history. Their tombs are visited daily by admiring multitudes, and their praises sung by historians.

In the realm of thought, Confucius, Buddha, Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Bacon, Leibnitz, Kant, and Einstein are in the forefront. They have been endowed with great brains and colossal intellects. They have been able to sustain deep and continuous thinking. They have ventured into the realm of abstractions. They have evolved great systems of thought. They have marshalled no armies and have conquered no neighboring nations, but they have mastered great fields of thought and conquered large kingdoms of darkness.

In the realm of character, Daniel, Saint John, Paul the Apostle to the Gentiles, Thomas Aquinas, Thomas à Kempis, and many others are distinguished. They have risen above the things that are little, low, and mean, and aspired to the things that are good and true and noble. They have kept themselves unspotted from the world and lived upon a high and noble plane. While they have conquered no neighboring nations, nor thrown any special light into any kingdoms of darkness, they have mastered themselves. To be preëminently good is really to be great. "He that ruleth his own spirit is mightier than he that taketh a city."

It is not often that any man is preëminent in all these realms of greatness. He must think clearly, of course, before he can act with discretion and wisdom. Alexander was brilliant in mind and splendid in action, but died early in life a drunken debauchee. Caesar was marvelous in mind and glorious in action. He was a correct and comprehensive historian, a sagacious statesman, a profound philosopher, and

a brilliant warrior, but no one could ascribe to him perfection in the realm of character. Napoleon, the most brilliant military genius the world ever saw, was consumed with a burning selfish ambition. He was ready to ride through rivers of human blood in order to reach a throne of power. Bacon was said to be "the wisest and meanest of mankind." Confucius was a serious thinker, but turned the faces of his people toward the past and their backs to the future. For this reason China has made but little progress during many centuries of civilization. Buddha was great in meditation, but failed in the field of action. Daniel was a stainless statesman but did nothing to entitle him to greatness in the realm of thought or action. Saint John, the divine, was pure in heart and beautiful in spirit, but achieved no great distinction in either of the other realms. Paul, the great apostle to the Gentiles, perhaps comes as near as any other man to measuring up to the requirements of real greatness in all these fields of achievement. He was truly great in action, great in thought and great in character. My text, however, for the morning does not ask what you think about this distinguished Jew, but it refers to Paul's great Master.

"What think ye of the Christ? Whose son is he?" This question is invested with perpetual youth. Other questions arise and are settled. This one remains for each succeeding generation. In fact, it is of increasing interest. More people are asking this question today than ever before. More books are being written in response to this question at this time than ever in the history of the world. The shadow of the Christ looms larger and larger with each succeeding generation. Thinking men throughout the world are asking this question today with greater interest than at any time in the past.

Let us study him, first, in the realm of action. What has he done for the world? What was his program of life?

What did he accomplish for the good of mankind? Did he achieve greatness in this realm?

In his day Rome was the center of civilization. She sat on her seven hills and ruled the world. Palestine was a distant and despised little province out on the perimeter of the vast Roman Empire. In that province Jesus came into being. He was born in a stable and cradled in a manger, but that stable and manger could not hide his greatness. He grew up in a despised little village, Nazareth. His countrymen asked the question: "Can there any good thing come out of Nazareth?" But Nazareth could not hide the great Christ. He attended the Synagogue school in his native village. He did not go away to college. Only once, according to holy writ, do we have any record of his having sat at the feet of the learned doctors of the law in the City of Jerusalem. He grew up in a carpenter's shop and earned his daily bread by the sweat of his brow. He did not visit among the great men of the earth. He did not know of their hopes and fears, their plans and programs.

At thirty years of age he lays down his carpenter's tools and comes out of the carpenter shop unknown, unsung, unheralded, but with a program such as no other man had ever conceived. Other great men had come into the world and established great kingdoms, but their kingdoms were of a temporal nature. Jesus came to establish a kingdom that should be spiritual in its nature, universal in its dominion, and eternal in its duration. No man had ever dreamed such a dream. No man had ever had such a sublime program. No man had ever known such a God-like ambition. He did not ask for a political over-lord to serve as Prime Minister. He did not seek a military genius to organize and train an army. Without an army, without a navy, without a soldier, without a sword, single-handed and alone he comes out of his carpen-

ter shop proposing to establish a kingdom that should deal with the higher spiritual nature of man, a kingdom that should grow and expand until it should cover the whole earth, a kingdom that should persist from generation to generation as long as the human race should last and then project itself into the eternity that was beyond. I say again no man had ever dreamed such a dream. No man had ever had such a God-like program.

He did not purpose to conquer the world by force of arms and rule over men's bodies by physical power. He came teaching the truth that by the power of truth he might conquer men's minds and rule in their hearts by the power of an infinite and endless love. He gave utterance to ideas that have revolutionized the thinking and action of mankind. Mr. Leckey, English historian, has well said: "The simple record of the life and teachings of Jesus as found in the New Testament has done more to soften and regenerate mankind than all the disquisitions of the philosophers and all the exhortations of the moralists." According to this distinguished Englishman, Jesus Christ has accomplished more for the good of mankind than all other benefactors combined! Napoleon is reported as having said to Marshall Bertrand: "Superficial minds profess to see a resemblance between Jesus Christ and men like Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and myself. I know men. No such resemblance exists. Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and myself founded our Empires by force of arms. Our Empires have disintegrated, our thrones have fallen, and our crowns are gone. No man is willing to do us honor today. Jesus Christ established his Empire by *force of love*, and today millions are ready to die for the Galilean. The distance between Jesus and all other men is the distance of infinity." In the realm of action Jesus stands alone unapproached and unapproachable.

In the realm of thought also Jesus is supreme. From the beginnings of human history the great thinkers have been trying to solve the riddle of the universe. They have wanted to know how the universe came into being. They have been searching for the Ultimate Reality which is back of all that appears to our senses. They have asked: "Who made the stars?" They have wanted to know if there is a God, and if there is, what is our relation to Him and His relation to us. They have tried to discover how the first man came into being. They want to know his origin, his duty, and his destiny.

When a college boy, the president of my college was also the professor of philosophy. One day on the blackboard he wrote the letters, U plus E equals X. He put down the chalk and addressed the class as follows: "Young ladies and gentlemen, these letters that I have written upon the blackboard represent the great problem of all ages. The letter U stands for the universe; the letter E for its explanation; the letter X is the answer sought. This problem has engaged the minds of all great thinkers from the beginnings of human history."

The old college president was right. This was the problem that engaged the mind of Lucretius when he wrote his treatise, *De Rerum Natura*, or *Concerning the Nature of Things*. Spencer was trying to solve it when he wrote *First Principles*. Zophar asked Job: "Canst thou by searching find out God? Canst thou find out the Almighty to perfection? It is as high as heaven. It is deeper than hell. What canst thou know? The measure thereof is longer than the earth and broader than the sea."

The great Confucius confessed to know little or nothing about God and how the Universe came to be. His teachings were confined mainly to human relations. He taught at

length concerning the five great human relations: the relation of the ruler to the subject, the relation of father to son, of husband to wife, older brother to the younger brother, friend to friend. He advised his disciples not to seek after the knowledge of God because such knowledge was beyond human comprehension.

Buddha was a profound thinker, but a great pessimist. In his philosophy there were four great and noble thoughts. The first was concerning pain, sorrow, and suffering. These are found everywhere. There is pain in birth, pain in sickness, pain in death, pain everywhere. The second great thought was that which causes pain, suffering, and sorrow, and he places *desire* as the cause of all such troubles. The suppression and crucifixion of all desire was his third great and noble thought. The ultimate aim of human existence was to be submissive to things as they are and finally, a complete annihilation of self. Like Confucius, he confessed to know little about God and the great riddle of the universe.

Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle are pathetic in their groping in the darkness trying to find the great first cause, the ultimate reality that lies behind the universe that appears to our senses. In their deepest researches and highest flights of reason they failed to comprehend the great riddle of the universe and to know God in all his fullness and glory.

In the thinking of Jesus, God was self evident. He assumes the existence of God and offers no argument to prove the assumption. To him God was more real than his mother, Mary. He constantly speaks of God as Father. "My father," "your father," "our father," are his favorite appellations. When asked by his disciples how to pray, he answered, "When you pray, say, Our Father who art in heaven, etc." When he wanted to teach the relations between God and man he said: "Behold the fowls of the air, for they sow not,

neither do they reap nor gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?" Again he said: "Why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They toil not and neither do they spin, and yet I say unto you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore if God so clothe the grass of the field which today is and tomorrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, oh ye of little faith." Time forbids that I should speak to you this morning concerning his great teachings concerning the relations of man to man. The heart of it all is in the Golden Rule: "All things whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you do ye even so unto them."

Small men think in small geographical terms. Sometimes a man thinks in terms of his city alone, and he may be elected the mayor of the city. A larger man thinks in larger geographical terms, and he may be made the governor of his state. A greater man thinks in still greater terms and may become the president of his nation. Confucius at first thought in terms of the Shantung province in which he lived. Afterward he thought in terms of all China. Buddha thought in terms of India. Edwin Arnold called him "The Light of Asia." Jesus was a Jew, but he did not think in terms of Judea alone. He thought in terms of the world. Concerning himself he said: "I am the light of the world."

A small man thinks in terms of brief time. He is trying to solve the problems of today. He looks only at the near side of near things. He takes the short view of life. That is the trouble with many of our politicians today. Some of them seem willing to sell the soul of the nation for a balanced budget. We must balance our budget and yet preserve our honor. Jesus thought in terms of eternity. He saw both sides of things far and near. In his sublime program he takes



all time and eternity into consideration. In his thinking he embraces all races, all colors, all classes, and all conditions of men. Time and eternity are in his program. No other man had ever thought in such terms. He said concerning himself: "I am the true way that leads to *life eternal*." Dwight Hillis has beautifully said: "Thus far the scholars have discovered five intellectual giants whose work has been revolutionary and epoch making. But the distance between these five intellectual giants and the rudest barbarian of the race is not so great as the distance between these five intellectual giants and the tall son of Mary, whose work for home and friendship, religion, and learning has been so great as to make his head strike among the stars." In the realm of thought Jesus stands on the highest possible pinnacle, unapproached and unapproachable.

In the realm of character, Jesus has no equal. He is the one man in human history without sin. In the Roman Court Pilate pronounced the verdict: "In him I find no fault." This verdict has become the verdict of all thinking men. Jesus is the one faultless flower of the human family, the one perfect gem of the human race. In his character there was no blemish, no spot, no stain, no wrinkle of any kind. In him were all the virtues of the perfect man. As the ray of light has in it all the colors of the rainbow, so in him are found all the virtues of a perfect manhood. In him those virtues reached their absolute perfection. Dr. Parker beautifully says: "Jesus beautifully unites within himself the sublimest precepts with the divinest practices, thus more than realizing the dream of the prophets and sages. He rises above the prejudice of his age, nation, and sect, and gives free reign to the spirit of God in his bosom. He sets aside the ceremonial law, sacred and true, and puts away the doctors of the law, subtle and irrefragible, and himself pours forth a doctrine as beautiful as

the light, as sublime as heaven, and as true as God." Richter says: "He is the holiest among the mighty and the mightiest among the holy, who with his pierced hands has lifted empires off their hinges, turned the stream of the centuries out of their channels and still governs the ages." He has given date to all human history. Every newspaper published and every letter written announce the birthday of the great Galilean. The sceptic in dating all his documents dates them from the birth of Jesus. Ask when any other man of human history was born and the answer will come as so many years before, or after, the birthday of Christ.

It thus appears that Jesus stands supreme in all the realms of human greatness. He stands alone and unapproached in the world's history. Ernest Renan beautifully says: "Jesus is the incomparable man to whom the universal conscience has decreed the title of Son of God. His beauty is eternal, his kingdom shall have no end."

After this brief discussion concerning the greatness of the Son of Mary perhaps you would not mind to have me recall some of the things said of him by his contemporaries. For this record we must, of course, go to the New Testament, the principal source of our information concerning this most marvelous man. The credibility of the record some may question. This I cannot discuss now.

On the first Christmas Eve night while the Shepherds were keeping watch over their flock the windows of heaven were opened, and ten thousand shafts of golden glory flooded that Judean valley with a light it had never known. An angel appeared unto the Shepherds saying: "Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be unto all people, for unto you is born this night in the city of David a *Saviour* which is *Christ the Lord*." According to Luke who seems to be a worthy witness, the angel seemed to think that

Jesus was no ordinary child. After his baptism as Jesus walked one day along the banks of the River Jordan, the great fiery prophet of the wilderness pointed him out saying: "Behold, the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world." John believed Jesus to be a man unmatched in the annals of human history.

As Jesus walked one morning along the road nearing Cesarea Philippi he asked his disciples saying: "Who do men say that I, the Son of man, am?" One of them replied: "Some say thou art John the Baptist." They saw on his face a look of disappointment. Another answered: "Some say thou art Elias." And still the look of disappointment. Another said: "Master, some say thou art Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." The light had shined in darkness and the darkness had comprehended it not. He was in the world and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. Having heard these answers and not being satisfied, Jesus turned directly to his own followers and asked: "Who do *you* say I am?" Peter stood out as the spokesman of the apostolic college. I think the light of heaven must have been in his eyes and a new glory in his face when he answered: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Thus, according to the record, his own most intimate followers confessed him to be more than a mere man.

In later years Saint Paul, the profoundest thinker of his day, and the most tireless exponent of the life and teachings of Jesus, expressed his opinion in his letter to the Philippians concerning the Galilean as follows: "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus, who being in the form of God, and thinking it not robbery to be counted equal with God but made himself of no reputation and took upon him the form of a servant and was made in the likeness of men, and being found in fashion as a man he humbled himself and

became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him and given him a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven and things in earth and things under the earth and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father." Paul was fully persuaded that Jesus was more than an ordinary man.

At a still later date Saint John who had been the most intimate friend and devoted follower of the Galilean wrote of him as follows: "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God. All things were made by him and without him was not anything made that was made. . . . The word was made flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld his glory, as the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." John believed Jesus to be really God and worthy of our highest adoration.

No doubt you will be interested in knowing what, according to the record, Jesus said about himself. Surely he must have known his own nature and from whence he came. According to the New Testament, Jesus did not believe he was a mere man. Hear him as he speaks of himself saying: "I am the true vine and my Father is the husbandman. Ye are the branches." Again hear him say: "I am the good shepherd, and know my sheep." Again: "I am the bread of life." "I am the water of life." Concerning his origin, hear him say: "I know from whence I came and whither I go. I came forth from the Father and again I return to the Father. I have power to lay down my life and I have power to take it again." Again hear him say: "I am in the Father and the Father is in me. He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." Standing amid the Judean hills lifting his hand and his voice, hear him saying to the weary multitude: "Come unto me all ye that

labor, and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and you shall find rest unto your souls." Surely this does not sound like the words of an ordinary man. Once more, at the open grave of Lazarus, typical of the grave of humanity, hear him say: "I am the resurrection and the life. He that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die." Are these the words of an ordinary man? On the evening before his betrayal and crucifixion, hear him again in his high priestly prayer: "Oh, Father, glorify thou me with the glory which I had with thee before the world was." Scientists tell us that this little planet where we live is something like two thousand million years old, and yet John quotes Jesus in these wonderful words, speaking of the glory which he had with the eternal Father before the world was formed. After his crucifixion and resurrection, listen to him as he says to his disciples: "All authority is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and disciple all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you, and lo, I am with you alway even unto the end of the ages."

Dr. Philip Schaff says: "These are the most astounding and transcendent pretensions ever set up by any human being. He makes them with perfect ease, freedom, and composure. He never apologizes or explains. He sets them forth as self evident truths which need only to be stated to challenge the belief and submission of mankind. No human being could set up the least of these pretensions without being counted mad. . . . Jesus is the most glorious, the most sacred, and the most certain of facts. He shines forth with the self evidencing light of the noonday sun. His character and claims

are supported by the most beautiful ethics, the sublimest doctrines, the mightiest miracles. He commands our assent. He wins our adoration. We cannot look upon him without spiritual benefit. We cannot think of him steadily without being lifted above everything that is little, low, and mean, and encouraged to everything that is good, true, and noble. In the hem of his garment there is healing to the touch. He is the glory of the past, the light of the present, the hope of the future. We cannot understand ourselves without him. While he is the light of the world, he is also the light of every man that cometh into the world. In him we find satisfaction for our intellectual longings after the truth, satisfaction for our aesthetic longings for that which is beautiful, satisfaction for our emotional longings for that which is true and good and noble."

Is he only a man or is he more than a man? Is he the son of Joseph or the Son of God? At this point is where the difference of opinion arises. All thinking men agree with J. Middleton Murry that Jesus is "The profoundest teacher, the bravest hero and the most loving man this world has ever known." Mr. Murry does not accept the doctrine of the deity of Jesus but places him in a category all to himself. H. G. Wells, though denying his deity, sets him upon a pinnacle of fame that is beyond the reach of all others. Rabbi Stephen S. Wise, perhaps the most distinguished living Jew, sometime since said that all men, Jews and Gentiles, would do well to follow the teachings and practices of Jesus since he is acknowledged as the most beautiful spirit and the most marvelous teacher of the race.

I present him to you this morning, young ladies and gentlemen of the graduating class, as the most marvelous man of all ages. He stands supreme in all the realms of true greatness. He is unapproached and unapproachable. The distance

between him and all others is the distance of infinity. For this reason it seems to me that he is more than a man. To me it seems that no such greatness and grandeur could be reached by one who is only a man. To my mind there are less difficulties in accepting the doctrine of his deity than in rejecting it. To accept the doctrine of the Virgin birth and the deity of Jesus is to accept the most beautiful and plausible theory for explaining the matchless deeds, the profound thinking, and the sinless life of the great Galilean. What better explanation can be offered? What better theory can be set forth? Did not Peter express your mind when he said of him: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God?"

I present him to you this morning as the world's greatest man in the realm of action, the profoundest thinker of the race, and the one sinless man of human history. Is he not worthy of our adoration? Can you do better than make him your counselor and guide? If you wish to pitch your life on the highest possible plane, make him the Lord and Master of your life. Will you say with Richard Watson Gilder:

If Jesus Christ is a man—  
And only a man—I say  
That of all mankind I cleave to Him  
And to Him will I cleave alway.

If Jesus Christ is a god—  
And the only God—I swear  
I will follow Him through heaven and hell,  
The earth, the sea, and the air!

Or much rather will you not with Thomas, as he put his finger into the prints of the nails, exclaim: "My Lord and my God."

H. A. BOAZ.