

**CHRIST THE WAY: A SERMON PREACHED
AT THE ORDINATION OF THE REV.
GEORGE M. BARTOL, AS MINISTER OF
THE FIRST CHURCH OF CHRIST, IN
LANCASTER, MASSACHUSETTS,
WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 4, 1847**

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Christ The Way: A Sermon Preached At The Ordination Of the Rev. George M. Bartol, As Minister Of The First Church Of Christ, In Lancaster, Massachusetts, Wednesday, August 4, 1847 by Cyrus A. Bartol

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CYRUS A. BARTOL

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ORDINATION OF THE REV. GEORGE M. BARTOL,

AS MINISTER OF THE

FIRST CHURCH OF CHRIST, IN LANCASTER, MASS.,

WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 4, 1847.

BY ~~CYRUS A. BARTOL~~ *C. A. Bartol*

JUNIOR MINISTER OF THE WEST CHURCH IN BOSTON.

WITH THE RIGHT HAND OF FELLOWSHIP,

BY REV. C. T. THAYER;

AND THE CHARGE, BY REV. ALONZO HILL.

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S E R M O N .

"I AM THE WAY."—JOHN xiv. 6.

JESUS, about to go away from his disciples, tells them the way he was going they already knew. Thomas replies, *we know not whither thou goest, and how can we know the way?* Jesus rejoins, *I am the way*,—the true and living way to the Father. Whatever particular purpose of consolation or instruction was in his mind at the beginning of the conversation, his thought swells into its wonted generality and grandeur as he goes on. He uses other strong figures of the same purport. *I am the door. I am the light of the world.* And the whole strain of the New Testament, literal and metaphorical, goes to this one point, that Christ is the way of human salvation.

This doctrine implies a preliminary consideration of the need men have of light and guidance. They are wanderers who have lost their way. They are as those that sit and wait in darkness for the sun to rise upon them. They are as an untended, scattered flock, seeking entrance into the fold. Christ is the path, the light, the door,—in one word, the way.

We may hold various theories of man's lost and benighted condition. We may say he is constitutionally depraved as the heir of Adam's sin; we may say he sins freely on his own account without any such fatal hereditary bias; or we may say that his errors and transgressions are but the marks of his imperfect and undeveloped state, like that of the nebula of the firmament, whose dim and misty form will be rounded at length into a shining world; and we may ask if it shall not take as long to make and perfect a man, an immortal soul, as a planet, a mass of glittering dust. But whatever our theory may be, we can hardly

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differ as to the fact, that man is an erring, sinful being; in darkness, and too often loving the darkness he is in, and needing light and guidance. Or if any one will assume the natural perfection and sufficient self-illumination of the soul, there will be to him no question between one way or another, for no way at all is needed.

Christ is the way,—the direct individual path of salvation. He that climbeth up some other way is a thief and a robber. There is no way that can be a substitute for him. And here is the great danger, which he himself foresaw, of making something else the substitute for him.

Many are in danger, at the present time, of substituting the Church for Christ,—the body for the head. And surely there can be no life, or light, or salvation in this. Christ's Church is properly the union of his disciples in him, by faith, and love, and obedience. Considered in this spiritual idea, as constituted by these inward bonds, it could not be so perverted or misplaced. But it is when unduly exaggerated in its external character, and so but partially manifesting its own idea, overlaying and alloying it with baser elements, that it suffers so fundamental an abuse. And that theory of the Church, which makes its essence to consist in outward forms and rites, particularly exposes it to this loss of its own purity, and sacrilegious assumption of the Master's office. The Church is substituted for Christ, whenever its organization and ordinances are brought into nearer view than his mind and life, and made prominent, to obscure his moral glory, to eclipse the sun of righteousness. It is substituted for Christ when it assumes by its special observances to be *the way* of salvation. It is at best and in the exercise of its loftiest influence, only *a way to the way*,—a foot-path into the clear and open road to God and heaven,—and it abjures its own office in grasping at a higher. All we ask of it is, to point to Christ. Even the forms or institutions with which he himself clothed his Church, are guarded against degenerating into superstition, only when held in simplicity and immediate connexion with himself. All beyond is error and injurious substitution for him.

The doctrine of the Church insisted on at the present day, with some new indications of success, penetrating into the Protestant communion, and well adapted to the weakness of human nature, is a gross departure from the truth of the Gospel. It makes the

formal and sensible in religion to be the essential. It affirms a particular mode of priestly ordination and succession, and a special understanding and administration of the sacraments, as vital and indispensable to regenerate and sanctify the soul. It recognizes no salvation in any other way. A greater violation of Christianity it is hard to conceive.

If there be any thing characteristic of the religion of the Gospel, it is its spirituality; its spare and frugal appeal to the senses, the richness and fulness of its address to the soul; the greater account it makes of the internal and invisible in religion, than of the outward and formal. The Church, according to this theory, magnifies the visible and disparages the unseen. It has its appropriate symbol, not in those finer forms of life, where the vital forces are hid in the centre of a noble organization, but in those inferior creatures, whose nervous and vital system is upon the outside and chiefly connected with the skin.

Christ is no external Saviour, by mechanical conditions, and a large apparatus of means, but himself the means, and as the great Apostle declares, *he is a quickening spirit*. The formal Church, I know, pretends to a loftier presentation even of Christ's influence than that of those whom it calls the dissenters, inasmuch as it teaches that his disciples receive him, even his living body, in the consecrated bread of the Supper. But what we want to receive is not the *body* of our Lord, but his *spirit*. Were the transubstantiation real, it would be a very little thing, compared with the spiritual transformation of mind and heart into the Saviour's image. For, as the Apostle Paul says, we do not know even Christ himself after the flesh. But we would have him formed within us the hope of glory. We would obtain our nourishment, not from his literal body, but from his living virtue, his divine temper, his holy love to God and man. As he himself said, after speaking of the eating of his flesh and drinking of his blood, *his words are spirit and life*.

And so in regard to the introductory rite of Baptism. It is a sacred symbol of Christian purity, of filial adoption and divine training, to be gladly used for ourselves and our children. But to see in it a literally regenerating power distinct from a sincere realizing of its import, is to substitute it as the way of salvation for Christ.

Had the ordinance itself this positive and independent efficacy, the chief Apostle would not have solemnly thanked God that he had baptized so few, merely for fear of misapprehension of his act. Received as signifying all that is holy in God's law, binding in parental duty, and needful in religious nurture, it is indeed precious. For thus it is but a step to Christ the living way.

In the natural religions which have arisen in the world, and in the early dispensation through Moses, suited to the spiritual childhood of the race, the element of form has predominated, the priest regarded as exercising prerogatives and functions mysteriously distinguishing him from all other men. But Christianity presumes that the human mind has at last come of age. Christianity presumes that it is at length capable of something better; receptive of an influence more akin to its own spiritual and aspiring nature. The great High Priest of our profession, the Son of God, identified himself with man, and would have his ministers and disciples identify themselves with mankind. The genius of his religion is to recognize the equality of men before God, their common privilege of freedom, growth, and pursuit of immortal happiness. And nothing can stir the best principles, excite the loftiest efforts, and turn the inborn dignity of the soul into an inbred worth, like this recognition of its capacity, by God's grace, to subdue evil inclinations into virtue, and turn temptation to victory. Christ is the way of salvation by this moral power with which he quickens and ennobles the human heart, kindles in it the sense of its native honor, and high duty, and heavenly destiny, and which a system of external means and appliances cannot exert.

The saving and sufficient virtue ascribed to such a system, makes, not Jesus, but the Church, the mediator between God and man; robs him of his peculiar office only to fail in discharging what it usurps. Let the Church take its true place, and no longer arrogate the Master's; by its superficial treatment, healing slightly the hurt of the daughter of my people, which only the great Physician can cure. It can bless the world only as it confines itself to the work of obeying its Head, and of manifesting and transmitting the true knowledge of Christ himself, without adding to, or taking from, his own word and life. Its business is simply that of a servant making way for the Master, and introducing us directly to him. So far as by the law of spiritual life, his own

immortal excellence has been conveyed to us through it, we will be grateful, whether the incumbent of a bishopric, or the lowliest kneeler on the cathedral's marble floor, have been a link in the chain. But behold the Saviour himself with his disciples to the end of the world. Lo,—the fountain, whose unbroken stream has flowed for ages and watered the breadth of the earth along successive generations, gushing fresh and pure as ever at the very door of our heart! Lo,—the divine portrait, of which the myriad copies have been printed on human souls, standing in all its original distinctness, unblurred in a single feature, unfading in the least hue of loveliness and beauty, for every eye to gaze at on the page of the Gospel. The portrait is alive! It is Jesus himself. He speaks in every recorded word, he moves in every narrated incident. He is the way still to the erring children of men. "*Follow me,*" are the words that fall on our ears as truly as on those of the publican and fisherman of Judea and Galilee. Let not the Church presume to substitute herself, but only set forth Him as the true and living way. She can only be impotent for his mighty work. She may rear her temple with its surmounting cross, she may maintain the decent and impressive order of her service, and employ every expedient instrument in her legitimate work. But in all, let her aim be to hold up the spiritual image and figure of her Lord, precisely as does the lone missionary who gathers his audience in some rude barn, or upon some rough hill-side, making the spot as consecrate to Heaven as though it were the walls and arches of St. Peter's that rang with the preached word, and echoed back the heaven-seeking enthusiasm of praise. And that body of Christians, small or great, best deserves to be called Christ's Church, which preaches him with the most vivid and regenerating power among men, be its ecclesiastical form and discipline what they may, through the whole wide range,—from the pomp of Rome to the Quaker's meagre ritual. He that best shows to sinners Christ as *the way* to God, is at the head of the Christian hierarchy, stands nearest to Christ in the Apostolic descent, holds the keys which he gave, is the rock on which he builds, and opens the gates of heaven in his name. Be he Pope of the Catholic world, or "the voice of one crying in the wilderness," the common Lord, *the quickening spirit*, so marks, and honors, and will own him at last.

But there is another danger of substituting for Christ as the