

THE CHRISTIAN'S TRIPLE ENVIRONMENT

"Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, to the saints which are at Ephesus, and to the faithful in Christ Jesus." Ephesians 1:1.

Environment means that which surrounds. It may be seen or unseen. Let us imagine that you are a passenger on the Queen Mary crossing the Atlantic Ocean. Around you is the ship itself, which is carrying you to your destination. Around you also are your fellow passengers, who are kind, companionable, and helpful. Around you is a third environment; the water of the ocean, which at its very best, by its nature, requires a lot of power to get through, and which at its worst becomes a terrific threat to your ever reaching your desired harbor.

In this illustration you have a kind of pattern of the threefold truth to be seen in these words which Paul wrote. Paul states that he is writing to those who are "in Christ Jesus." As Christians this is their first and, spiritually speaking, their closest environment. He also says that he is writing "to the saints." Here, then, is the second environment: life lived in the fellowship of other Christians. But Paul further states that these believers, who are "in Christ Jesus" and in fellowship with one another, are also "in Ephesus." This is their outermost environment. It is glaringly visible and capable of exerting a tremendous pressure.

Now let us go back to our simple parable. Christians are said to be "in Christ Jesus" -- environed by His life, supported by His grace, and guided by His Spirit -- as the passengers on the Queen Mary are environed and upheld by the ship for safe passage across the Atlantic Ocean. Christians, moreover, are said to be in the society or communion of saints -- that is, they are strengthened and inspired one by the other -- much as the fellow passengers on the Queen Mary find stimulus, enrichment, and good cheer in their pleasant comradeship. And then Christians are said to be "in Ephesus" -- surrounded by its evils, disciplined by its temptations, and challenged by its paganism -- just as the mighty Queen Mary finds its progress resisted and its throbbing engines strained by the buffeting winds and waters that encompass it.

Here, then, is the Christian's Triple Environment. Here Paul sets down the environment amidst which the life of the Christian must be lived. He visualizes the situation and the circumstances.

I. It is a life in Christ Jesus.

Curiously and strangely enough, you can ask a man if he is in business, and he knows what you are talking about. You can ask him if he is in one of the professions, and he knows what you are talking about. You can ask him if he is in love, and, if he is, he knows glowingly well what you mean. But, if you ask the average man if he is in Christ Jesus, he is strangely mystified by your question. Perhaps he is either embarrassed by his own lack of understanding or else he is ready to embarrass you by telling you frankly that you must be one of those religious fanatics or crack-pots. And he may be a church member, too.

Yet, the early Christians knew perfectly well the meaning of this phrase, "in Christ Jesus." The expression "in Christ" occurs one hundred and sixty-four times in the epistles of Paul. A shining example is in II Corinthians 5:17: "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new." The man who wrote those words, and who influenced others to believe them, knew what he was talking about.

Paul, in the days when he was Saul, was like a good many church members today. He was both worried and wearied: worried as to whether he could struggle hard enough, keep the

commandments well enough, and do good works enough to save his soul; and wearied because the whole thing seemed to be so futile and so disappointing. Like many other unhappy people, he was trying to make up by the persecution of Christians for the fears and inadequacies he felt in his own heart.

Then the light dawned that day on the road to Damascus, when suddenly there came to Paul the flaming insight that the way to a new start in life, with release from the plague of guilt, and the impotence of self-effort, was through yielding completely to a Person. Decisively it dawned upon him that the way to be saved was not that of struggle with precepts, prohibitions, programs, and performances. It was rather the way of a personal meeting with a personal Christ issuing in a personal communion between him and Christ, in which Paul furnished the surrender and Christ furnished the salvation and the strength. It still remains true that no healthy, assured, and effective Christian life begins until one is introduced to the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

Dora Greenwell tells of a woman of eighty years who passed by faith into this new order of life in which one actually experiences the pardon, the peace, and the presence of Christ. At eighty-four she attempted a stanza of poetry in which she made the significant and pathetic confession:

"If you ask me how long I have lived in the world,
I'm old, I'm very old.
If you ask me how long I have truly lived,
'Twill very soon be told;
Past eighty years of age,
Yet only four years old."

Eighty years in the community where she resided, but only four years "in Christ Jesus"!

Yet Christ, by His living presence through the Holy Spirit, wants to be the closest and most powerful environment that we can know. He wants us to be bathed in His love as the sunlight bathes and makes fragrant the flowers. He wants us to be rooted in His faithfulness as the vine is rooted in the rich, nourishing soil. He wants us to be invigorated by His inexhaustible life as the blood in our bodies is invigorated by the oxygen breathed in from the ever ample air about us. Christ is our first and most intimate environment.

II. It is a life in the fellowship of the saints.

A saint is nothing more nor less than a believer in Christ. A saint is one who is "in Christ Jesus." If one is not a saint, then he is not a Christian. If he is a Christian, then he is a saint.

This word saint is seldom used in the singular in the New Testament. This fact is all the more exciting when one recalls that one of the fanaticisms of the middle ages was the belief that a man or woman must go off into some self-imposed and lonely exile if he or she wanted to be a "saint." The Christians of the first century did not adopt any such policy or practice any such way of life. Together in blessed fellowship they formed their communities of worship and benevolence. In these fellowships, whether in private homes, or noble synagogues, or in the open air, they sang together the simple hymns of their faith, prayed together in earnest devotion, shared the problems and responsibilities of their common lot, and went out together to tell others about the Christ Who had saved them, and sought to introduce them to their Saviour.

Paul located the saints in the churches. The New Testament does not teach solitary religion. It was unthinkable to Paul that a saint or believer in Christ would be outside the fellowship of believers in the churches. It is as abnormal to find a saint outside of a church as to find jay birds in the fellowship of sparrows. No one need identify

himself with the church in order to be saved, but the New Testament is quite clear in teaching that a person will want to be a member of a church after he is saved.

Fellow Christians, let us not be indifferent to this second environment of the life of faith. We need each other. We cannot thrive in Christian growth without each other. Christianity thrives only through the ministry of the Word and partnership in Christian service.

In writing to the Ephesians Paul reminded them that, inasmuch as they were saints, they should live "as becometh saints." A little boy who had seen the sunshine streaming through the stained-glass window said: "A saint is a person who lets the light shine through." We should reflect the glory of Christ and transmit the light of His gospel. We are to be luminaries in this dark world, pointing others to the Light of the world. It has been said that a saint is one who makes it easier for others to believe that God is love, that Christ is his Saviour, and that the Christian life is the happiest and fullest life of all.

III. It is a life that is lived in an uncongenial world.

In our text Paul was writing to the Christians who were living in the environs of Ephesus, that ancient center of pagan culture and gilded sin. The people of Ephesus were idolatrous, immoral and prosperous. The city was Satan's headquarters. It was a focus of idolatry, superstition, wealth, and luxury, springing from commerce and moral corruption. Mean tricks flourished in her market-places. Degrading sports were the thrill of her amusement haunts. Vile sensualities walked unabashed in her streets, and were even winked at in her temples. Yet here, in the murky middle of all this pagan godlessness, were these strong Christians living godly and influential lives. Their glory did not lie in the hope that they were going to be saints in heaven; rather, it lay in the fact that they were saints then and there, in Ephesus.

We must realize that we are in an environment of toil, temptation, and sorrow, with all the mystery of the unknown and with the constant assaults of Satan and his followers. This world is our sphere of discipline. We must not compromise with it or yield to it. We must regard it as our arena, in which we are to become more than conquerors as we overcome it.

If any of you are weak, wavering, and wandering Christians, I have a reassuring word for you: take care of the first two environments, and this third one will never be able to defeat you. If you are in Christ, and in the supporting fellowship of enlightened, courageous, and helpful Christians, the world can neither corrupt you nor crush you. On the contrary, you will be able, by the inworking energies of the Spirit of God, to offer a positive witness of truth and righteousness in your Ephesus, or your place of residence, wherever that may be. You, as a devoted child of God, can overcome the temptations that come to you from the environment in which you live, and you can bear a triumphant and attractive testimony to the love of the Christ Who has redeemed you.

In Christ one finds the dawn of life. In the fellowship of true Christians one finds the development of life. In Ephesus, or one's physical environment, one finds the discipline of life. This is our triple environment.