

Sermon for Sunday, September 4, 1977, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri 63105

SOME THINGS GOD SUB-CONTRACTS

Acts 2:36-42

Text: "And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." Acts 2-42

Little Sally was assigned a term theme on Abraham Lincoln. As she studied for the paper she came to admire this great American. She determined that in her paper she would give him all the credit he deserved. So, she wrote in her paper, "Abraham Lincoln was born on February 12, 1809, in a log cabin he built himself." The moral of this story is, "there are some things you cannot do for yourself."

In the spiritual realm there are certain things that we simply can't do for ourselves. For example, we can't forgive our own sins. Forgiveness of sins belongs to God. We may forget about our sins, ignore our sins, cover up our sins, but we can't forgive our own sins. Another thing we can't do is save ourselves. Only Jesus can do that. The work of salvation demands a cross that only Jesus can bear.

Another thing we can't do is give ourselves a new heart. Only God can do that. Only God can touch our hearts and mend the brokenness within us. Another thing we can't do is fill ourselves with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is a gift of God. Only he can fill our hearts with his presence.

So, there are some things that only God can do. On the other hand there are some things that God sub-contracts to us. There are some things that God leaves for us to do for ourselves.

I suspect many of us this morning feel that our Christian faith does not mean as much to us as we wish it did. We are not really living triumphant, Christian lives. We are not happy, joyous Christians--we wonder why and we are disappointed about it. For many of us the reason may be very simple. It is because we have not clearly understood what God does and what he sub-contracts. That is, there has been confusion in our minds as to exactly what we must do for ourselves.

Notice in the first place that God sub-contracts belief to us. To believe in God, to trust in Jesus for our salvation, is our business, not God's. Let me point out to you that belief in the Biblical sense is more than mere intellectual assent. Belief--faith--trust in God involves not only the mind, it involves the emotions--the heart--as well. In our scripture for this morning we read how Peter concluded his sermon to the Jews on the day of Pentecost and he said, "Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified." And those Jews believed--they responded in faith with their whole beings--and the Bible says, "Now when they heard this they were cut to the heart..."

Yes, to believe involved more than mere intellectual assent for it involved their hearts. I have an article written by a medical doctor that describes what happened to Jesus on the cross physically as he was dying. It describes in vivid detail the awful process of dying that occurred in the body of Jesus on the cross. One Sunday morning one of our doctors was reading that description of death of Jesus to a youth Sunday School class and as he read it he began to cry. He believed in Jesus with his mind and his heart: as he read of the suffering of Jesus as he died the tears rolled down his cheeks. He was cut to the heart.

Some years ago a friend introduced me to a man named Jim Vaus. Jim Vaus is an electronic genius who had gotten mixed up in the underworld. He worked for a man named Mickey Cohen and did wire tapping for him. He actually worked out a system

whereby he could interrupt the wire service that brought the racing results long enough for the crooks to place bets on the winning horses. But Jim Vaus was not a happy man. Back when Billy Graham had his first great crusade in Los Angeles, Jim walked into the arena one night. He heard Dr. Graham talk about Jesus and how he died for him. That night he believed--a belief that involved not only his mind, but his heart as well. When the invitation was given Jim Vaus came forward. After that he was never the same. He went on to give his life working in New York with boys from street gangs to claim them for Jesus.

I have people say to me, "Well, I believe in a God", but it has not changed their lives. I have people say to me, "I can believe that Jesus was God's son," but it has not changed their lives. Why? Because their belief has not been total, they have not believed with their hearts. How about you this morning? Do you believe? Has your faith in Jesus, your trust in God, involved you totally, so much so that your heart is cut within you?

But there is a second thing that God will not do, that he sub-contracts to us, for God will not repent for us. No, repentance is our business, not God's. In our scripture for this morning when the people believed and were cut to their hearts, the Bible tells us they said, "Brethren, what shall we do?" And Peter said to them, "repent."

Most of the problems people have with Christianity are not intellectual, they are moral. You see, it means that not only must we be sorry for our sins, but we must be willing to turn from them. Most of us are truly sorry when we do wrong things. Most of us have deep regrets when we are guilty of sin. Yet our sorrow too frequently does not lead us to change. Once when I was a young pastor a member of my congregation was guilty of stealing from his employer. When he went to trial I appeared for him as a character witness. I told the judge that the young man was sorry for what he had done and that his family was making restitution for what he had stolen. I will never forget how that judge leaned over his desk, fixed his eyes on mine and said, "Young pastor, I am not interested in restitution, I am interested in reformation." Well, that's what God is interested in. He is interested in a changed life. He is interested in a repentance that leads us to reformation. If you are carrying on an affair, God can't stop for you; if you are guilty of lying, God can't tell the truth for you; if you are cheating and stealing, God can't quit for you; if you are selfish and self-centered, if you are bad-tempered, if you are intemperate, or whatever, God won't stop for you. No, that's our business not God's.

Are you sorry for your sin and willing to change? If you are willing, you see, God will help you lead a new life. Back in the Middle Ages the master of an estate in England lay dying. He was concerned about his soul and he called in a servant whom he knew to be a devout Christian. "Jim", he said, "I am dying. I am not sure that I am going to Heaven. Can you tell me what I must do?" The devout old servant knew the pride of his master and he said, "Sir, if you want to be saved, you will have to go to the pigpen, get on your knees in the mud, and say, 'God be merciful to me, a sinner!' His master said, "I could not possibly do that. What would the neighbors and the servants think?" A week passed and he called his servant back again and said, "Old friend, what did you say I had to do to be saved?" The servant replied, "Sir, you will have to go to the pigpen." The master said, "I have been thinking it over and I am ready to go." Then the servant said to him, "Master, you don't really have to go to the pigpen. You just have to be willing." So with us. We have to be willing to change and then God will help us.

Many of us this morning are not willing to turn from our sins. We want to be different, but we are waiting for God to strike us with some spiritual thunder-bolt so that we won't have to go through the agony and stress of breaking old habits.

old patterns, old greeds. We want a miracle from God to make us morally perfect but God has sub-contracted repentance to us. That's our business, not his. How about you this morning. Are you sorry for your sins--sorry enough that you are truly willing to turn from them? You see, until you are, God can't really help you.

This brings us to the third thing that God subcontracts to us. On that day as Peter preached the Bible tells us first that they believed, that they were cut to their hearts. Second, the Bible tells us they repented. They were sorry for their sins and were willing to turn from them. And then thirdly the Bible tells us they obeyed God, for they "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching..." Obedience is the third thing that God subcontracts to us. To obey is our business, not God's.

Are you obeying God this morning? If you believe and if you repent the Bible tells us that God puts a new power in us to help us live a new life of obedience. That day Peter said to those men whose hearts were cut that if they repented, "you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." Yes, God would give them power at work in their lives to help them live a new life for Jesus.

Billy Graham tells the story of the alcoholic who was under the care of a psychiatrist, but the doctor gave up because the alcoholic was getting no better. But one night that alcoholic wandered into a crusade meeting and listened in amazement to the Gospel message. One night when the invitation was given he went forward and surrendered to Jesus and a new power came into his life. That night before he went to sleep, he reached as usual for the nearby bottle of liquor, but something--or Someone-- stopped his hand. Getting out of his bed he took the bottle and emptied it down the drain. When he awakened the next morning, through habit he reached again for his morning bracer. It was not there, but it did not matter somehow. He called his psychiatrist and said, "you have lost a patient. Jesus has saved me from drink and I am a new man." The psychiatrist responded, "That's wonderful. Maybe I can find help where you found it. I am not an alcoholic, but I have my own problems and needs." He too began to attend the meetings and one night accepted Jesus as his own saviour.

Yes, when we believe and when we repent God puts his Spirit in us and gives us power to live a new life. And when that happens, God calls on us to live a life of obedience to him. Are you doing that this morning? Are you living a life of obedience? Lately at night I have been reading a biography of John Calvin. Some of the things about this man are so amazing that I have been reading them out loud to Sydney. When Calvin was about 25 and he had already written his famous Institutes, he was forced to flee France. He wanted to go to Basel. Since he was a very shy, timid, and retiring man, he wanted to escape from the world to a good library and spend his time studying, doing research, and writing. He felt he could best serve God by providing spiritual ammunition to the preacher-soldiers who were on the front lines of the Reformation rather than being there himself. But God had other plans for John Calvin. The road to Basel was blocked by troops and he was forced to take a detour through Geneva, planning to spend only one night there. But a man named Farel discovered that Calvin was in Geneva and he confronted him with the desperate need that city had for his leadership. Calvin protested, "I am timid, weak, and fainthearted by nature, and feel myself not equal..." But Farel replied, "Do you really believe a Christian can give in to his timid heart so much that he can stay aloof from the battle for the Kingdom of God?" Calvin's biographer writes, "A feeling overtook him as bitter as death. He saw himself suddenly torn out of the path which had opened up before him, and found himself stationed in battle and unrest--in the front line. Gone was the hope of work in a quiet, hidden place..." As he offered his hand to Farel, a tear rolled over his caved-in cheek and he said, "I obey God."

God does many things for us. He loves us and gives us Jesus to die for our sins. He offers to give us the Holy Spirit in our lives to help us live for him. But there are some things he sub-contracts to us. To believe, to repent, to obey--that's our business. Let me ask you this: have you signed your contract yet?

This brings us to the third thing that God sub-contracts to us. On that day as Peter preached the Bible tells us first that they believed, that they were obedient to their hearts. Second, the Bible tells us they repented. They were sorry for their sins and were willing to turn from them. And then thirdly the Bible tells us they obeyed God, for they "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching..."

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