

THE HISTORIC CHOICE

Lincoln Park Baptist Church, West Newton, Massachusetts

November 1, 1964

Scripture: Joshua 24:1-28

Introduction

Next Tuesday, November 3, 1964, the American people are going to the polls. After a campaign of bitterness, of charges and countercharges both here in Massachusetts and on the national level, the people will make their will known. Billy Graham, referring to this electoral decision, spoke about America's historic choice. The choice that we make will surely affect our lives and the course of world history. It is a historic choice in the sense that it is made by people within history with a sense of history. If we did not think that the course of human events could be changed, we would not bother to go to the polls. But we think that human decisions affect the course of history and therefore desire to have a participation in determining the course that events will take.

As Christians we are under obligation to examine the issues, to ponder the qualifications of the candidates, and to cast our vote in an intelligent way. As Christians, we should also realize that we belong to two different but interpenetrating realms. We are citizens of this world but also citizens of the world to come, in which we already participate through faith in Christ. It is this double perspective that gives us boldness, and at the same time puts us in a predicament. It gives us boldness because we know that the Lord cares for our lives and the destiny of the nations are in his hands. But it also puts us in a predicament, since we realize the limitations of human systems and know that all political structures are tinged with imperfections and sooner or later, may even be corrupted.

In order to gain perspective from which to look at current events, it might be wise to examine an event in the life of the people of God in the O.T., in which they also made a historic choice. I refer to the passage of the Scripture read earlier in the service. Joshua, the leader who took Moses' place, gathers the people before a shrine at Shechem. There an impressive ceremony of covenant renewal takes place. Let us examine this passage carefully to find out what is going on.

I. The historic choice of the People of Israel.

A. In form, this passage is a covenant renewal ceremony.

1. Gathering together of the whole community at Shechem.

"Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before the Lord."

In other words, the whole community through its leaders is presenting itself before the Lord.

2. Preamble – identification of the superior party in the covenant:

“Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel”.

3. Historical prologue – recital of the benevolent acts of God toward Israel.

- a. I took you father Abraham from beyond the River;
 - led him through the land of Canaan,
 - made his offspring many.
- b. Deliverance from Egyptian bondage – *“I brought you out of Egypt”*
- c. I gave the Amorites into your hands.
- d. I delivered you out of the hand of Balak, king of Moab.
- e. I gave you a land on which you had not labored and cities which you had not built.

4. Stipulations

- a. No other gods – *“Now therefore, fear the Lord, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods which your fathers served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the Lord.”*
- b. Joshua and his people make a choice: *“And if you be unwilling to serve the Lord, choose this day whom you will serve – whether the gods our fathers served in the region beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you dwell; -- but as for me and my house, we will serve the Lord.”*

5. The people make their historic choice. Then the people answered:

“Far be it from us that we should forsake the Lord, to serve other gods; for it is the Lord our God who brought us and our fathers up from the land of Egypt, and out of the house of bondage, and who did those great signs in our sight, and preserved us in all that way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; and the Lord drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land; therefore we also will serve the Lord, for he is our God.” Notice that they recognize God’s action of deliverance; then they proceed to recognize him as God and Lord.

6. Joshua warns them of the seriousness of their choice.

“You cannot serve the Lord; for he is a holy God; he is jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions nor your sins. If you forsake the Lord and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you after having done you good.” Covenant relation involves obedience to the stipulations of the covenant. Disobedience entails punishment.

7. The people reaffirm their stand. And the people said to Joshua: *“Nay, but we will serve the Lord.*
 Then Joshua said to the people: *“You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the Lord, to serve him.”*
 They said: *“We are witnesses.”*
 He said: *“Put away the foreign gods which are among you, and incline your heart to the Lord, the God of Israel.”*
 And the people said to Joshua: *“The Lord our God we will serve, and his voice we will obey.”*

8. The Covenant made
“So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem. And Joshua wrote these words in the book of the law of God; and he took a great stone and set it up there under the oak in the sanctuary of the Lord.”
 And Joshua said to all the people: *Behold, this stone shall be a witness against us; for it has heard all the words of the Lord which he spoke to us. Therefore it shall be a witness against you, lest you deal falsely with your God.”*

II. The Implications of this Historic Choice for us

A. The situation of Israel

1. The choice of the people was based on the prior deeds of deliverance on the part of God in the midst of history.

Deliverance from Egypt, from the hands of the Amorites and Balak, king of Moab:

- The Lord chose Abraham
- The Lord gave us the land

“Not by your hand but by my hand have your attained victory,” says the Lord of Hosts. The people felt the grace of God in the midst of the historical event.

2. The people decide to obey as a nation; the basic policy of the nation will be determined by their faith in God – no other gods. The relationships between members of the community are to be determined on the basis of God’s law, the law summarized in the ten commandments.

B. The situation of the Christian church

1. Our decision as a people of God is based on God’s action in Jesus Christ – a historical action: -- His message
 -- His death
 -- His resurrection

2. We do not have the relationship to government that the people of Israel had
"My kingdom is not of this world."
"Give unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's."
3. This is the tension in which the church of Christ lives—
 - a. Citizens of God's kingdom
 - b. Citizens of the world. The vision and knowledge that we receive is for the sake of this world – for the present structures of society, which we know are perishable.

III. The Historic Choice for the Christian Church in America

A. The things given in our present historical situation:

1. The richness of the land:
 - natural resources: mines, ore,
 - waterways, lakes, rivers,
 - rich farm land
2. The two basic documents:
 - the Declaration of Independence
 - the Constitution of the U.S.A.

Two of the greatest political documents ever written by man—
"All men are created equal."

B. The situation of the church here:

1. Pluralism in religion
2. Separation of church and state – one of the great achievements of the American political system. Good for both the church and the state. The church stands on its own legs, the way it started.

C. America has been the haven of the free churches: Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian, Congregational, and many, many others.

D. We face the problem of the end of the frontier. We cannot run away any more from problems or difficult situations. We have to meet the challenges of:

- the city
- the melting pot
- industrialization.

E. We Christian people are challenged to think boldly. What spirit and perspective is going to shape American life? Is it the spirit of bitterness, strife, hate? Do we dare advance real solutions to the problems we face?

Conclusion

1. No matter who is elected to the presidency of the U.S., the problems that we have today will be with us after election day.

2. Christian people cannot shrink from responsibility at this time. There is need for bold and imaginative thinking in the areas of:

- race relations
- relations between minorities
- technological unemployment
- care for the aged
- education
- foreign affairs
- peace.

The average citizen must take part in the elucidation of these problems and especially in their solution.

3. Let us get all the information available and put our Christian perspective to work in these different areas.

4. Let us be open to the future. God is still acting. He may have surprises for us that we may not yet know. Let us endeavor to be faithful in the midst of turbulent America. Let us be courageous and dedicated to the postulate that all men are created equal before God.

The people of God in the O.T. made their choice in ancient times. We, the heirs of the Christian tradition, must make our choice in modern times, when circumstances are different, when the position of the church is entirely unprecedented. Yet we are challenged to serve the Lord and obey his commandments faithfully in the situation in which we find ourselves.

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