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Joins and Bands

by T. Austin-Sparks

Edited and supplied by the Golden Candlestick Trust.

"Holding fast the Head, from whom all the body, being supplied and knit together through the joints and bands, increaseth with the increase of God" Col. 2:19 (A.S.V.).

"But speaking truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him, who is the head, even Christ; from whom all the body fitly framed and knit together through that which every joint supplieth, according to the working in due measure of each several part, maketh the increase of the body unto the building up of itself in love" Eph. 4:15-16 (A.S.V.).

You will see at once that in both passages the question is one of full growth, "increaseth with the increase of God"; "grow up in all things into Him". The matter of full growth, or that of growth at all, is a very acute matter with us surely, for, when all has been said and done, the test and the value of everything is as to what increase there actually is as the result. The final appraisalment of the value of things is: What is the result? We may have a very great deal of instruction and teaching, maybe a great wealth of spiritual knowledge as such, maybe much else in addition that is good and which it is important to have, but the real determination of the value of everything is the measure of spiritual increase or growth. It comes back to a question of where we are as a result of it all; not a question of how much more do we know (that is in our minds), but how much more there is of the Lord and His wealth. It all resolves itself into a question of whether what is meant by building up, making increase with the increase of God, is the result.

I confess to you that is the most poignant question in my own heart. Looking back over the many years, with the tremendous amount that has been put forth, literally heaps upon heaps through the years, I have to weigh things over against that and I am asking myself, "What does it amount to? Really what is there for it as to the spiritual measure of those to whom it has been given?" It is good

and comforting to our hearts to remember that finally and ultimately that is not our responsibility if we have been faithful. The responsibility rests upon all who receive and therefore I am seeking to bring you in the first place to ask your own hearts whether what the Lord has made possible and what the Lord has intended is really working out in you to spiritual increase individually - it must first of all be individual - but then, as the result of that, corporately. As the church, is there something more than a large measure of information; is there a large measure of the Lord, a true increase of God? It comes down to whether God is the more manifest, the more in expression, whether God is met, God is encountered, whether the registration is the registration of God. I submit that that is a very solemn question for our consideration. It becomes a very real personal question for every one of us.

That being the matter here in view, we have to ask and seek to discover the way of increase of the Body of Christ, and this little fragment on which I have put my finger is a key: "joints and bands". If we understand what those two words represent for us, then we have got a secret.

This word "Body" with which we are so familiar, is a word which itself is very significant. It really comes from a Sanskrit word 'bonda' or band, that by which a number of things, living things, are bound together and made one whole, a living whole. That is the meaning of "body". The New Testament phrase, "the bond of love" is another word, with which we are also familiar. The word 'bond' there is the Greek word 'sundesmos' and 'syndesmology' is the word which is used in the physical realm, in the medical realm, for that system of tissues, ligaments, by which all parts of the body, all limbs and members, are brought into a living and active whole.

So here you have in the Word of God something which really does for us, in its very language, in the words themselves, explain what the Body of Christ is: something comprised of many parts, but all constituted a living whole by joints and bands, and these joints and bands fulfil the function not only of holding together, but of supplying. Then you want to know what it is they supply, or what is their particular function or nature. These tissues are vital things, that is, they are living things, and their nature and work therefore is life, and joints and bands fulfil their ministry as they live according to the life which is in them.

Now, we know that if a ligament is torn or injured, it cannot fulfil its function until it is put right, but, worse than that, it cripples the whole body and robs it of its full effectiveness and efficiency, and until adjustment is made or relief is brought, then there is severe limitation resultant from the injury of a ligamentary tissue. Life is hindered, ministry is arrested.

Now, the question for us, following the main question of responsibility, is, "Am I a joint or a band of supply?" It is a question of supply. If I do not go beyond that, that is enough. It really does touch the heart of things.

Now, you will notice that this is not a matter of public ministry. Look again into the Word. It is the church functioning, it is building itself up; the church, the Body, is building itself up and increasing with the increase of God, and the law or principle of increase in the body is that every member is making a living contribution. It is a matter of supply. What am I giving of a living kind to the whole Body? What living contribution am I making, how much am I functioning by way of adding to the saints?

If we understand our physical bodies, there is one thing that we shall know, and it is that while there are almost countless myriads of organisms or cells in one body, not one of them was made or exists for itself - not one. There is not one tiny fragment of all this vast system - for in one human body

there are as many microscopic organisms as there are stars in the heaven, not one of them exists for itself. The whole body, from the most minute point upwards, was made for fellowship, made for co-operation, made on the principle of relatedness for mutual contribution, mutual building up, and it is when some of those little cells cease to make their contribution to building up that we are ill; our efficiency is reduced. The responsibility for the whole body rests upon each, and each has to take responsibility for the whole because that is the law of creation. The body is made for fellowship, and only so does the body grow and increase.

There are two things. There is the fact of individuality - and when we speak about individualism let us not be misunderstood as meaning that we rule out individuality. There is individuality and there is specialisation within the framework of this physical body. Oh, what a multiplicity of specialist functions within one body, so that every member cannot do the work of another member, every organ cannot fulfil the function of the other organs. There is individuality and there is specialisation. That is one side. That is your particular function and responsibility and mine, and we are not all melted into a shapeless mass, without distinctiveness of purpose and object.

But there is the other side. While there is individuality or specialisation of function, no one member, organ or organism can ever fulfil the purpose of the whole. In God's universe, it takes myriads of personalities, individualities and specialisations to fulfil all the purposes of Christ in His Body.

But while you get those two things, you have got to recognise the meaning of this word 'band' or 'Body'. On the one hand, no one can move as merely an individual - that is individualism. On the other hand, the whole cannot move as so many unrelated organisms. They are all needed, but for both purposes the specialist function, the individual responsibility, and the whole collective purpose; relatedness is essential. That is the Body.

There is a difference between a congregation and a body. We cannot live our spiritual life unto ourselves. If we do, we are so violating the Divine law as to defeat the very end of our existence, as to make impossible the realisation of what God made us for as members of Christ. So then that must be something turning back on itself and curtailing its own life, narrowing down its own vitality and efficiency. We cannot live our own Christian life unto ourselves. We cannot have a merely nebulous conception of the Body of Christ, "Yes, the Body is one, all Christians are one, 'all one body we'!" as a theory, a doctrine, a truth, something mentally accepted - we cannot have that and realise the purpose of our existence in Christ. It has got to be practical. It has got to come right down here to our life every day, and it all resolves itself into those two words, 'joints and bands'.

You know that you dare not take a merely theoretical attitude towards your own physical body. You have to take a very practical attitude towards it. It is a reality, this unity, sometimes we would to God that it was otherwise! If only there was something in Christian Science, it would be very comforting. When you have a toothache, *you* have not got it (that is, telling yourself the body is one), nevertheless it does not exist. It would be very convenient and nice. In spiritual relationships sometimes we would like to think in such a way as to rule out certain awkward members, but it is a practical reality, and something has got to be done over this matter where there are difficulties. If a ligament has been damaged, it has got to be repaired; we cannot by some theory rule it out of existence or regard it as not being in existence. It is a practical thing, it is hurting, and that brings us right back to this point.

What is that sensory system in us which registers hurt when there is hurt? The Spirit is easily entreated. He is grieved and, being grieved, wherever the Spirit is grieved, we may take it that the Life is under arrest. You see, the Body is very practical.

But what I want the main emphasis to rest upon now is this thought back of joints and bands. We are all called into such a capacity, and the question which every one of us has to answer is, "Am I a means of supply?" First of all, so far as the Body of Christ is concerned, my responsibility begins with the assembly to which I belong in the purpose of God. I cannot first of all regard the body of Christ from its heavenly and universal standpoint. Oh yes, it is a heavenly thing, a universal thing, and in recognizing that, we have very often to refuse to recognise a lot of things which contradict the heavenly fact. But then this thing is brought home to us in God's own method, in God's own economy, in a practical way by local assemblies. God makes the universal practical in the local. God has always required practical expressions of heavenly truths. Oh yes, our crucifixion with Christ is a great heavenly reality. God has demanded a practical expression in baptism. Our union with Christ is a great, eternal, heavenly reality, but God has laid down the law of His table as a means of testifying to the truth. These are things inside of the church which is His Body as testimonies.

The great comprehensive truth of the universal, heavenly, spiritual body is testified to in a local assembly. God fulfils the universal in its laws and principles in the local. We cannot get out of it if there is going to be the increase of God. That is God's way. The increase of God is in the relatedness of the saints in a quite concrete, definite and positive way.

Well now, that brings us to the assemblies to which we belong, the assembly in which God has put us. Our growth and the growth of each other member of that assembly and the growth of the whole as a part of the Body of Christ comes down to the matter of whether we are really contributing members, giving, supplying. Not supplying information, but supplying Life and Life taking quite a definite form. You see, the Life is in the tissues. It is not something abstract outside. Life is in definite tissues which bind together. The tissue becomes the vehicle of the life, and that tissue is love in action. "Building itself up in love", love in action. Love in action may take many forms, but for spiritual purposes we begin with the spiritual concern for the interests of the Lord's people with whom He has related us, contributing to their spiritual increase, growth, enlargement, giving of the Lord out from our own lives as we are receiving Christ into our lives.

Will you really seriously face the question which arises, not face another address, another bit of spiritual teaching, but the practical question? Looking back and taking into account all the times in which we have been under the Lord's Word, what has it meant in our *real spiritual* increase? I know that a large measure of our spiritual increase is out of sight; I know that it is never possible to take our own spiritual stature, to measure ourselves, but I do know that it is possible by certain means and certain rules to judge as to progress and increase. I am not going to apply the rules or even suggest what they are, but I feel the Lord just asks us at this time to raise this question of measure. "In due measure", "each several part in due measure" to the building up of the whole. Do let us remember that this relatedness is not something imposed from the outside. The ligaments of our bodies are not something superimposed upon us. They come into being and grow on the principle of life. Life produces them, life maintains them, succours them, and life produces them in order that they may be a safeguard against the disintegration of our bodies. Get rid of your ligaments and your members will fall apart. Life produces these ligaments in order to maintain relatedness unto function, unto effectiveness, therefore Life becomes a very serious question. It almost becomes the question. We have to watch against anything that comes in to arrest the spiritual Life, the Life of the Lord. If we are endlessly turning in on ourselves, we are violating a law of Life, which law is always unto others, for the Body. That is the law of Life, it is always for the Body.

Now you have one of the rules by which you can judge. You are bound to become limited in yourself and at once to limit the saints around you if you are eternally self-occupied, if there is an undue occupation with yourself. You are violating a law of Life. You will not be able to breathe presently,

and those around you will be starving. It is a contradiction of the whole law. Let us beware of injuring the Life, arresting the Life. Life will solve most of our problems for us. It solves our problems physically, does it not? Today we cannot think, we cannot remember, we cannot do all sorts of things and then we begin to dwell upon the meaning of this, "Oh well, we are getting old, we are not so young as we once were, we are evidently breaking down, our time is passing...". Tomorrow we feel wonderfully well, something has happened and we are fresher; we can remember, we can think, we can concentrate, we can do. We are no longer going to die on the spot. Hope, vision! Well, there is an accession of physical life for some reason, perhaps a good night's rest. Things have changed in us somewhere, something that was troubling us in the digestive realm has gone, and we are released from that pressure. It is simply a matter of life physically, and our problems are solved. Oh, the awful problems of yesterday! We could not see our way through, but today where are the problems of yesterday? It may not be that they are all cleared up, but somehow we can face them, we are on top of them. New life has come in.

Spiritually it is like that. Spiritual problems, problems of ourselves, doctrine, the teaching of God's Word, whether it means this or that - in one place it says one thing and in another place just the opposite - going round and round, turning in on ourselves, and the saints are getting no good from us. We are a burden to ourselves and to everyone else. An accession of Divine Life will solve our problem. The way through is not the way of reason, it is not squaring down to these things and trying to reconcile all the contradictory factors, or the strain of intense application. Presently we will want to go away and find a lodge in a garden of cucumbers and be all alone to get through our problems, and we never will! Life will do it. Life, and we are up and we are out. We may not have the full mental answer, but we have got it in our hearts. The thing has ceased to bind us and to crush us.

We must remember that Life works in exactly two opposite directions, which are not contradictory. Life works from the one member to the whole, and Life works from the whole to the one. If you cut yourself off from the whole, you are cutting yourself off from your Life. What we need for Life, then, is fellowship. Cut yourself off from fellowship, shut yourself up to yourself, and you cut off the very stream of your Life. You must have fellowship for Life. Therefore watch it, protect it. Watch against anything that the enemy would bring in to come between you and other saints, to make you an individual with a hedge around you. That is cutting you off from Life. That is what he is after. Watch against anything that would in any way arrest your life of contributing.

If you are right down there in the mire or the quagmire, I suggest to you that perhaps your way out is to begin to think of the good of others, of those fellow-members of Christ around you. Set yourself to see to their spiritual increase and your deliverance will come.

The Lord make us all joints and bands.