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Christ, In the Table of Shewbread

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Exodus 25:23-30; Leviticus 24:5-9.

We remind ourselves of the inclusive truth of this whole revelation, that which embraces everything. It is what Christ is as set forth in these types and symbols. We are not looking for truths as such, we are seeking to see the Lord Jesus as God sets Him forth, and not as He has been conceived by man. These are Divine thoughts given in revelation, and those thoughts of God always circle round and point to His Son. So here we look to see in the very first place what Christ is signified as being, in the table of shewbread.

In this presentation of the sanctuary we are told nothing at this point about the veil dividing between the most holy place and the holy place. Vessels are first dealt with, and then the surroundings. So we find ourselves, without being told so at this point, on the other side of the veil in the holy place, and no longer in the most holy. We are moving spiritually now. When it comes to moving literally in the construction of the tabernacle, we shall move from the outside to the inside and finish in the immediate presence of God. That has its own significance, but we are moving now from the Divine side, and not from the human side. When it is our side, we begin outside the court and have to come by way of the altar and move steadily towards the centre towards the ultimate place with God. All these things of spiritual value have to become operative to bring us in. When we are speaking from the Divine side, we begin in heaven; that is, God begins at His end, always. God begins at the consummation in Christ and then shows us how that consummation is reached. Here we are on the Divine side, and so we move from the centre outward, and now we are in the holy place.

Into the most holy place the high priest entered just once a year himself, signifying that the going in of the Lord Jesus in the capacity of High Priest, not once a year, but once for all, for ever. In the capacity of High Priest He goes through once and for all with His precious blood into the presence of God. But when we come to the holy place, it is not that full and ultimate significance of the high priest in atonement; it is priesthood viewed from another standpoint. Here the priesthood more in general is in view. It is priesthood not on the basis of the once and for all atonement of the High Priest, but it is priesthood in relation to other things. It is now priestly ministry which results from that inclusive and final thing, the High Priestly work of the Lord Jesus. Because a High Priest, in an inclusive and comprehensive way has gone through, there issues, as it were, from that a priestly ministry in relation to other things, and on a more general scale. By that we mean that the High Priestly work is gathered up and focused in the full atonement. That is specific, that is final, there is nothing more to be done in relation to that, it is complete once and for all. But because that is so, because there is a High Priest in the presence of God, and because the full atonement has been made, and because there has come about a fellowship with God, a communion with God on the basis of that atonement, then a priestly ministry issues out from that and has to do with a testimony not only Godward, but a testimony manward. It is a ministry now which is more outward.

First of all, God is satisfied. God's requirements are answered; in His presence He has what He requires. Then out from that, still having the Godward relationship, but now having a relationship and a ministry of a priestly character manward, there is priesthood outward as from God's full satisfaction. This is what begins in the holy place in a peculiar way.

Now, the Lord Jesus is the first and inclusive Priest in every respect. This table and this Shewbread are closely bound up with priestly ministry. It is food for the priests, it is a memorial in priesthood, in priestly ministry. It is priesthood that is centred in this table.

Then you ask: what is, then, the nature and basis of a priestly ministry carried on in the Lord Jesus in an outward way? What gives that ministry its quality, its power, its energy? Food is a question of value, of energy, of activity, and you ask: what is it that gives this priestly ministry its strength, its sustenance, its value, its energy? What lies behind it? Once more, it is just what the Lord Jesus is.

The ark is of acacia wood covered with pure gold around it, and a mercy seat of pure gold resting upon it. Now you have exactly the same elements in the table. You have acacia wood representing an incorruptible humanity overlaid with pure gold, symbolising His essential Deity and Divine nature. Then the crown of pure gold again upon it, showing that it is not only the union of the Divine with the human as in the table, but that the thing which governs and controls as from above, the thing which marks it as something above an ordinary union of divinity with humanity, but gives it that distinctive feature which is unique, which does not and cannot relate to us, is His Deity, His very Godhead.

The Lord safeguards truth, and it is well for us to be quite clear on the doctrine. We must remember that - although it is true that in Christ we are joined to the Lord one spirit, and our union is a very real union, and in Him there is a union between a Divine nature and a human nature, and it is true in us now in Christ - Christ is, after all, much more than that, and we never do come to share His Deity. If we are partakers of the Divine nature, as the Word says we are, we are not partakers of the Divine person, God. There is no Deity in which we share. That is where, of course, false teaching has led so many astray. I think that was the heart of what was called at one time "New Theology". The slogan was the deification of humanity, that by certain processes upward eventually man would become deified and God. That is a lie of antichrist. This crown of gold upon the mercy seat and upon the table of shewbread is something which marks that vessel off as distinct from another vessel. It is the

Deity superimposed, and Christ, while He is Man and God united, has as the supreme feature in His ministry the fact that He is Very God, that there is Deity there 'superimposed' (though that is hardly the right word), crowning all. We come to Him as our consummation. That is very blessed. He is that one Mediator between God and man, the Man Christ Jesus. He is the Divine Man, but He is God. "My Lord, and my God". That is the ultimate strength of this one thing, the crowning factor in this whole thing.

When we have seen the Lord Jesus in that position, carrying on His priestly work outward in the values of His representative person, but also in the value of what He is above and beyond that in union with the Father, in common equality with Jehovah, then we are able to move downward in this matter and see that these values are carried out in the sanctuary and are, again, to be expressed in the very ministry of the sanctuary: that is, the ministry of the people of God.

We should recognise and grasp this: that it is on the basis of what Christ is that ministry is fulfilled. Ministry comes out of what Christ is, and therefore all ministry which is really going to be spiritually effectual must be on the basis of a revelation of what Christ is, a knowledge of what Christ is, and a union with what Christ is. There is no place in the heavenly order of things for merely professional ministry. There is no place for human appointment, or choice of ministry. That is altogether foreign to Divine thought. No man can take up the ministry. No man can be appointed to the ministry.

If you have a spiritual experience of a deep character which is *your* experience, something that has come into the innermost part of your being and is yours in a spiritual way, if you could impart that to me, then I could do as you do in virtue of that. But you cannot; therefore for me to try and do as you do on the basis of your experience would be merely imitation and objective, and would be devoid of that spiritual life and strength that you have. That is exactly what has happened over ministry; it is imitation, it is taking up something objectively, whereas true ministry according to God's thought is on the basis of something spiritual in our own history, and that "something spiritual" is an inward knowledge of what Christ is, and ministry can only be fruitful and effectual in the measure in which we have that inner knowledge of what Christ is.

On the other hand, that knowledge of Christ does issue in ministry. You do not need to have it organised. It is not necessary that anybody should appoint you to work or should open a door for you to minister, to send you here or there. A knowledge of the Lord Jesus issues spontaneously in ministry. I believe that the Lord, therefore, for a great many of His people, has no kind of appointment as they look for appointment to ministry. So many have a mentality that they must join some kind of society which will send them out to a certain place to fulfil ministry before they can be the Lord's servants. For the greater number the Lord has no such thing, but He has ministry just as definite. That is no more definite than the ministry of the whole church, and that is what we are coming to. It is all Israel that is in this ministry, but at the moment we are concentrating upon Christ Himself.

What is this ministry which is just as real, just as definitely a Divine ordination as any ministry which is specifically sent out to some particular part of the world to do a certain kind of work? The Lord simply causes the majority of His people to live somewhere, perhaps where they would not choose to live. They do not see on the face of it any kind of marked appointment of God; they find themselves there. If they try to get out, they find they cannot get out so easily, they find that they are moving in some way out of the will of God if they try.

Now then, they are there for this purpose: that their own spiritual knowledge of the Lord should spontaneously express itself. *That is ministry.* All ministry is what Christ is, and then, so far as the

ministering instruments are concerned, what they know Him to be. You may never be appointed to what you call the ministry, and yet you are appointed by God. The real value of ministry is the expression of the Lord Jesus. It is not doing something on the outside that we call the Lord's work. It is the living expression of the Lord Jesus. If we are really under the government of the Lord Himself in this matter, as in all matters, the Lord will never send us out to what we might call some specific ministry until what we have and know of the Lord has found expression where we are. What have you got of the Lord? What do you know of the Lord? That has got to be expressed to the full where you are. The whole inclination is, "If only we could get away from where we are, out to this great world of need, into this sphere and that sphere where there is such a call, then we could be of some value!" The Lord says, "You must extend to the full measure where you are before there is going to be a move. If I want you somewhere else, leave that to Me."

This is a governing law, that not until what you know and have of the Lord has been expressed where you are, and in being expressed, represents the ministry of Christ, can there be anything else. Now you see that the long-drawn-out waiting sometimes is allowed to have the opposite effect of making us to some extent indifferent or careless as to the present, the here and the now. Oh, that terrible evil of "some time ahead"! We have got a mental eye upon when we are "released", when we are "called out", when our "ministry comes", when the object of this present time is reached. The object is injuring the present, some intangible will-o'-the-wisp tomorrow is injuring today. The point, here and now, is your ministry - and your ministry is not official, but what you have of Christ being expressed. That is the law of increase, strength, energy and sustenance. These sons of Aaron had their ministry maintained upon what Christ was, as set forth in those loaves. The values of Christ are the constituents of ministry.

Seeing that that is the heart of the thing, we can turn our eyes outward a little more, and see this wonderful thing: that it is Aaron and his sons, it is a family in ministry. It is man according to God's mind to whom priesthood is committed. Now, the Lord Jesus on the side of His manhood was as a Priest, and the apostle distinctly says this, taken from among men. He is man. He is not of their kind, but He is from among them. And He is man wholly according to God's mind, and God has committed to man according to His mind the whole matter of priesthood; that is, when that supreme thing has been done, the atoning work. The High Priest does that. It is done apart from us, and it is final, so that it is now for us. But when that is done as basic, then the priestly ministry on the basis of that is given to man according to God's mind. I think it is one of the most wonderful things in Divine revelation, that what is meant by priesthood is laid upon man, that man is called into the place of priesthood - man, mark you, as he is according to God's mind - but then, of course, we come to that by union with Christ. We are regarded in Christ as being according to God's mind and then priesthood is entrusted.

In our meditation in this book in another connection, we have said that this universe is 'redempto-centric' and will be for all eternity; that right at the centre of this universe is redemption. In coming ages the Lamb is in the midst of the throne and the song will be of the Lamb. It will be the redemption song. At the heart of this universe is precious blood, a sacrifice, redemption; this universe is 'redempto-centric'.

The church occupies the central place in this universe. Christ the Head, the church His members: one. That is the sanctuary of Exodus, Christ and His own forming the sanctuary for God, as this Tabernacle gathered up all Israel (and we see it in the twelve loaves here, representing the twelve tribes, all centred there in priesthood). The church became the centre of a universe, a cosmos, and everything was related to Israel, so that all the nations were dealt with according to their attitude towards Israel - if favourable, mercy was shown; if unfavourable, judgment was shown. So this

sanctuary of the book of Ephesians built up a habitation of God through the Spirit. The church, Christ and His members, becomes the centre of this universe, but it is redemption. The church's foundation, the church's song, the church's testimony is redemption: "He has redeemed us unto God by His blood."

Now you see that the church has the testimony of Jesus and the testimony of redemption at its heart, and thus the universe becomes 'redemp-to-centric', but the church is the vessel of that truth, of that great reality. So then, if redemption is the great central thing to this universe now and for the coming ages, priesthood is simply the expression, the ministry of redemption. Redemption is a much bigger thing than forgiveness of sins and salvation from hell. Redemption goes right on to God's ultimate thought. It is not just what we are redeemed *from*, it is what we are redeemed *unto*. Redemption is the deepest thing. The church is the embodiment of redemption, and priesthood has to do with redemption. That is the whole meaning of Exodus and Leviticus: redeemed unto God, unto all the eternal purposes.

God projected His purposes in eternity past. There was an interruption and an interference, but redemption goes back to the purpose. The purposes are now reached through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, the Redeemer. He is made unto us redemption.

What is priestly ministry? What is this ministry to which all the people of God are called, the whole church? Not the ministry of a certain class now as typified in the Old Testament, but the ministry, the priesthood of all believers. Coming back to this immediate type, the table and shewbread, it is an active, energetic thing; it is a thing of power, for that is the meaning of the bread. It is something living, active and energetic. It is strength. If you do not have bread you will lose your energy, your activity. This bread is to maintain a priesthood in strength and energy. What, then, is this ministry? It is the active power in relation to redemption; it is the going forth of a Divine energy in relation to redemption. It is not just the evangel for the salvation of sinners from their sin. Redemption is a comprehensive thing, including all the purposes of God, but you and I and the whole church are called by God to be the vehicle through which the power of redemption and the mighty testimony of redemption operates. It is a mighty power, not a truth or doctrine, that that great redemption that is in Christ Jesus is mediated through us. If we have a living spiritual knowledge of what Christ is, then when we speak of redemption there is the power of redemption in our speech. It is not something we have said; it is something we have done. Every utterance of God is a fiat, is an act; every Holy Spirit utterance is a work, not just a statement; it is an energy, it brings conviction, it leaves a mark, it makes it impossible for those who have heard it to be the same before God afterwards. They are held responsible for something, for one thing, and it is a savour of Life unto Life or of death unto death. It is a ministry of a spiritual power, the reality of redemption. That is the meaning of priesthood.

Priesthood is a spiritual expression; if you like, a declaration, but a declaration is so often linked with and limited to words, but an expression is something more than that. It is power. Paul said that he did not wish that the faith of the Corinthians should stand in the wisdom of words, but in the power of God. Therefore he meant that what comes through him is not just to be an oration, but an effective something. That is deeper than words. That is the priestly ministry to which we are called. On the one side it comes from our apprehension and appropriation of what Christ is, our knowledge of what Christ is, our receiving of what Christ is by faith, our living daily upon what Christ is, and then out from that there is spiritual influence in word, in life, and in deed. That is priestly ministry.

Prayer is one form of priestly ministry. Intercession is one form. It is powerful; it is the mediation of Divine power. The ministry of the Word is another form. And there are many other forms of

priesthood. Some have personal ministry and have no gift for public ministry at all, but that is priesthood. It is all related to God's end in the church, the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. That ministry is sustained in a spiritual fellowship and union with Christ in what He is.

That is the heart of the Lord's table. We are not going to link this table of the holy place with the Lord's table necessarily, but in principle we have a link. When we come to the Lord's table and we take the loaf, what are we doing? What is the meaning of that? It is the church there gathered exclusively, the church that is gathered at the Lord's table. No one else has a right to the Lord's table but members of Christ. When the church is gathered to the Lord's table and takes of the loaf, it is in testimony declaring that its life and its ministry are based upon its union with what Christ is in His perfected humanity. God's priestly power is entrusted to Man after His own heart and Christ is that; inclusively and representatively.

Now, here is one whose humanity is perfect and God has invested Him with priestly rights and priestly power. We are saying that we live by what Christ is, on the basis of Christ's perfected humanity. That is the loaf. Read the description of these loaves of the shewbread in Leviticus and you will see that it is Christ's perfected humanity; perfect, yet perfected by the fires of the Cross and brought into the presence of God. I do like this play on words in the Hebrew in verse 30 of chapter 25: "And thou shalt set upon the table shewbread before Me always." Here you have two words: (1) Shewbread, which is literally, "the bread of faces". The Hebrew language literally translated always sounds strange to us. It means that the faces are in the presence of God, God is looking upon the faces; and (2) the literal translation of the last clause is: "before My face continually". 'Thou shalt set upon the table the bread of faces before My face continually.' Face to face! A memorial to the people of God for ever, face to face in Him - what Christ is and our union with Him as that brings us to be face to face, His face to us and our faces unashamed to Him. It is face to face with the Lord in Christ because of what He is.

We need to deal with the details of the shewbread to see what He is. That fine flour is His humanity brought into the fire and perfected, and then the frankincense spread over all is the Divine excellencies of the Son of Man face to face with God. God looks on that. That can look up to God without fear. God can look at that without displeasure and we are in Him in the holy place. That is the basis of priesthood.

How much more there is to say about this! We can understand the meaning of the terrible and unabated assault of the whole universe of evil and evil powers upon a true spiritual expression of the church and the Cross. Get a true spiritual expression and testimony to the church as resting upon the real work of the Cross of the Lord Jesus and you see what that means. That means that the universe becomes redempto-centric, that all the mischief of the kingdom of darkness is put aside. The centre is the triumph of His Cross and that triumph is gathered up into the church as the vessel of that testimony. Get anything like a testimony, though it may be imperfect in its expression, yet a living testimony to that, and a ministry in relation to that, and hell stops at nothing to ruin that testimony in some way and destroy that vessel, and also to bring its ministers into a place where their functioning is made impossible.

You are right in the heart of universal conflict when you come to see these things and stand in them spiritually. It is tremendous what the enemy does in this connection. It is the explanation of this persistent, evil, fierce assault of the powers of darkness upon a true spiritual expression of the Cross in and through the church, giving the church its real position and vocation in the universe of proclaiming, expressing and ministering in a priestly way in relation to the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.

The real issue is being before the Lord in a position of spiritual ministry, priestly ministry. That is where the whole thing focuses, on the ground of that, how that is sustained and the issue or result of it in this universe against all the power of evil.