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Keeping Christ in View

by T. Austin-Sparks

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From time to time we feel it to be helpful to our readers if we try to put into some concrete statement something relating to this ministry.

Very many write us of its value and helpfulness, and we are glad that its true object and purpose is discerned by so large a number. Even so, we are continually concerned to bring it to clear and definite issues. This is because this ministry is so very practical in its background, and we are anxious that this fact should be kept in view. These are not just ideas and teachings that are expounded, but the issues of a life in the school of deep and, often, painful experience. It is the result of something being done and then explained.

Note the order. In the old dispensation, God first showed a pattern and then commanded that all should be made accordingly. In this dispensation, He began with mighty acts, the acts of the Cross, Resurrection and Exaltation of Christ, and the sending of the Holy Spirit; but these were not wholly understood even by those chiefly involved, and their meaning had to be arrived at by way of progress and crises. This ministry is so much of that character. The Lord has done and continues to do things in us and with us, and then teaches us their meaning. We are still learning; hence there is always room for adjustment, and need for teachableness.

To sum up this work and teaching of the Lord, it just amounts to this. There has taken place an undercutting of the whole of Christianity, as it is known now, in its crystallization into a set, established, and accepted system, with all its institutionalism, traditionalism, etc., and a bringing right back and down to the spiritual and essential significance and implications of Jesus the Lord. So very much of that which goes by His Name is now so much separated from His Person. Not historically, of course, for it all relates to Him as the historic Jesus; but vitally, spiritually, organically,

and immediately. The 'Gospel' has suffered this severance. It is now so largely 'salvation' as a matter of forgiveness, justification, peace, happiness, heaven, and escape from hell.

These are truly the blessings of the Gospel, but at the beginning it was Christ who was preached; the Person who was kept in full view; the one through whom the Gospel came. It was "the gospel of God concerning his Son". The emphasis was not upon what men could have, but upon God's rights and Christ's glory. This may seem to be straining things, but let it be understood that the Holy Spirit - the Custodian of Christ's honour - is most jealous on this matter, and will only commit Himself to this keeping of Christ in view.

There is everywhere today an immense amount of definite or tacit admission of the failure of Christianity; the asking of the question: 'What is wrong with Christianity or the "churches"?' The would-be doctors seeking to diagnose the malady and prescribe the remedy are a growing multitude. Not all are mistaken, and if we seem to have joined their ranks, we do not think that we are speculating when we assert that that which is preached and taught has become - although largely unwittingly - detached from the *personal* significance of Christ Himself. The business of the Church and its ministry is not to propagate a system of Christian truth, but to bring Christ Himself, in the power of the Holy Spirit, wherever it goes and is. The Gospel as such saves nobody. Salvation is a vital personal contact and union with Christ Himself. Hence, and this is the crucial point, Christ must have a living organism in which and by which to make that contact and that union.

Christianity has become something almost entirely apart from the Person of Christ. It is a religion, a system, a philosophy of life, a set of ways, practices, and ideas. It is something that people enter into, take up, join, and choose. They come to Christ through the Christian system, but the Christ they come to is a denominational, sectarian, ritualistic, or evangelical Christ. The Christ that they know and believe in is the Christ of this or that connection and interpretation. Christ rarely now creates Christianity; it is Christianity that creates Christ.

The Church - that is, what is termed the Church - is now an institution. It has become the Church of historical production, of accidental or human production. It is a hierarchy of ecclesiastical, social, human, and arbitrary selection, direction, and government. As we know it, it is not "one body and one Spirit". The terminology of Christ as Head of the Church, and the Church as the Body of Christ, is employed, but it is all objective, and so largely in the realm of Divine Sovereignty; it is fatalistic in effect, rather than immediate, subjective, and essentially personal in the presence and authority of the Holy Spirit.

All this, which represents a vast amount more, indicates the loss of one inclusive and pre-eminently essential reality. That is an inward revelation of Christ as the embodiment of an altogether other order of creation; of a constitution which is according to a Kingdom that *is not* after this world, either as a whole or in any part.

Christ just *cannot* be conformed to anything here, national or denominational. "The world knew him not." He is, to the natural man - who *may* be a Christian - inscrutable, inexplicable, and unintelligible. His power and influence cannot be attributed to any of those things looked for by the world as explanations; *e.g.* birth, education, personal abilities either in constitution, acquirement, or attainment. He positively repudiated all such attempts to explain His works and teachings, and to answer men's question, "Whence hath this man this...?"

What Christ did and said came, so He declared, not out from Himself, but by seeing the Father. What we do and say must be by seeing the Son, and this demands, in Paul's words, a "spirit of wisdom and

revelation in the knowledge of him". It is the irreconcilable difference between imitation and duplication, on the one hand, and generation and reproduction, on the other.

The reproduction of the Church is not its duplication. It is a fatal mistake to try to form 'New Testament Churches'. That is the policy of sectarianism: to have churches everywhere of a pattern and technique. The Church was *born*, out from heaven, as all its members have to be, and it is just the same with churches. It is the violation of a fundamental principle to try to form churches after any pattern, and so to duplicate - even *if* the original was born of God and represents His mind. Every next one must be born in the same way. Everything with God takes its rise and its form from life - and that *Divine* life! In so far as we crystallize truth into a set compass, measure and limited interpretation, we make it minister death rather than life; bondage rather than liberty; letter rather than Spirit. God's way is once, and once only, to create - the prototype - and then to *generate* from that; not copy it by imitation, either mass-production or otherwise.

The Holy Spirit is in charge of this dispensation and everything has to be born of the Spirit if it is of God. We may have all the truth that is in the New Testament and seek to reproduce things according to it, but that is no guarantee that we shall have the living organism. We hear people speaking of 'standing for' this truth and that; meeting on the ground of such-and-such a truth; but this can only engender divisions and exclusiveness. *Christ* is the ground of meeting, and we should contend only for this ground.

It is significant that the majority of divisions, and these the most acute, have come about in directions where 'the one Body' has been the truth contended for. We can well understand that the enemy would make it his business to bring such a vital matter into dishonour and reproach; but there will always be this possibility, if truth - even the most important truth - is put in the place of the Person. Even the truth or doctrine of the Person can obscure the Person Himself. Hence even fundamentalism can be very un-Christ-like in spirit and behaviour.

All this, and so much more of its kind, represents the need for that basic and drastic work of the Cross, as an abiding power, so that what is presented is not 'Christianity', as it has come to be so largely known, but Christ, in terms of life, light, power, love, liberty, and glory. It is not this or that 'church', but Christ expressed, as present in the corporate organism - His Body.

Hence it is no particular teaching, company of Christians, 'work', or 'Fellowship' that is the object of this ministry, but only and always the Fulness of Christ.

There are many Divine principles governing such a testimony, but these are contained in the messages of this spoken and printed ministry.

When all has been said, the fundamental fact has to be borne in mind that the real seeing of Jesus is a Divine fiat, an act of God: the granting of a "spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him".