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Functioning in the Body of Christ

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: John 21:18-22; Acts 9:6; Rom. 12:4-11; Eph. 4:16; Col. 2:19.

You may have wondered what the passages read were pointing to, bearing upon. In the first place, you will recognise that they indicate that there is a distinctiveness of function in the Body of Christ.

Distinctiveness of Function

That seems to me to be at least implied and indicated, if not laid down, in the rebuke or correction which the Lord administered to Peter. There could be no flippancy about things. Perhaps it would be wrong to charge Peter with flippancy, but after what had just been said to him, that threefold challenge, "Lovest thou Me?", until it got in and it says that Peter was grieved, and then immediately after that, the Lord indicating the nature of the death by which he would glorify God, you would think that there would be no more breath left in the man. He ought to be in a state of collapse, but the fact is, in the presence of all that, he immediately turns round, sees another man in whom he is interested, and exhibits curiosity as to what his end might be and how he would fulfil his course. So the Lord has mildly, but quite definitely, to administer a correction, if not a rebuke: "If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou Me". A more perfect translation is, "If I will that he tarry while I am coming, what is that to thee? Be thou all the time following me". By that means the Lord said to Peter in effect, "Each man represents something himself quite distinctly in the purpose of God and each man has got to make sure that he is fulfilling that distinctive function!" The Lord brought Peter back from his more or less general interest in things to the particular thing which was his concern. It was almost as though the Lord said, "Look here, Peter, you mind your own business, that is what you have to do!" He brought him right back there.

And that can lead on to these other passages. Paul on the way to Damascus is told to go into the city and it shall be told him what he shall do, what he must do. I may come to that as we go on, but we are led on to these passages in Ephesians and Colossians where, among other things, there is this point very clearly and strongly indicated: it is each several part working in due measure; it is the due measure of each several part, the joints and the bands by which the Body makes increase.

Now what I am putting my finger upon specifically is this distinctiveness of function in the Body of Christ - a most important thing if there is to be growth in Christ unto that fulness which we have seen, which the Lord has sought to bring into view so continually, that fulness of Christ which is the end toward which He is working; the measure of the fulness of Christ. How is it reached, how is it attained, how are we coming to that full end of God's purpose? Well, among other things, it is along this line, in this way: each several part working in due measure. While there is a right kind of consideration for, and interest in, and concern for all other members, that must not interfere with this. This is your business, this is your personal matter, this is something you have got to take up as a personal thing. Distinctiveness of function... that, in this Body of Christ as in the human body, there are the numerous, almost countless, functioning organs. And the whole body, for its increase, for its strength, for its health, for the fulfilment of its purpose, the attainment of its end, depends upon every one of those countless organs functioning fully, doing its own work, seeing to its own business. The Lord has very strongly set that as a governing principle in attainment, and there are some very, very strong lessons in the Word of God about that.

In the Old Testament an outstanding and very well-known illustration of this very thing is the case of Achan, when all Israel (that is what is said there) all Israel were held up, brought to a standstill, their progress arrested, their attaining of the Divine end checked, by one man. One little organism and the whole body is affected, and the New Testament statement about that in the spiritual realm is "whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it" (1 Cor. 12:26). We cannot understand that, we cannot see it, we cannot apprehend it. It is not manifest always, but there is the Divine judgment, the Divine knowledge about it, and there is the fact stated. The Holy Spirit is stating facts.

Now to bring this right home to us. We are so many, and there are as many functions as there are people, as many distinctive and definite functions in the Body of Christ, and if there is going to be real increase of the whole, if there is going to be a movement towards the greater fulness of Christ by the whole, each one has got to look to it that he or she functions according to their distinctive calling and appointment, and functions to the full measure therein. First of all, we state the fact. Are you alive to the fact? Do you accept the fact? You, as an individual, are a functioning part, or called to be a functioning part, of the Body of Christ, and the whole Body depends upon you for its fulness; upon you working in due measure. Do not try and reason it out, to understand it and see how it does. Do not forget that the Lord does not always explain how, when He lays down facts. Nicodemus is full of "how's". How this and that? The Lord does not seek at all to deal with his "how's". He states a fact or facts and says, in effect, "This is a matter which is not open to discussion, to reasoning, to argument. This is something which exists as a fact. You have got to take it first of all as a fact; you come into the understanding of it later." Well now, there we begin - the fact of distinctiveness of function in every part of the Body of Christ.

Diversity of Function in Distinctiveness

But then, following that, there is the diversity of function in distinctiveness. There are many members and every member represents something quite definite. All the members have not the same office; and the next thing that you and I have to face quite definitely, is this: that we have got to come into our particular function, as to what it is - we have got to know it. That sounds difficult,

but again it is a fact. A very great deal of spiritual loss to ourselves and to the Lord's people, to the Body of Christ, results from people not knowing what their particular job is, not being in their job a hundred percent; that is, they are trying to do half a dozen things or two things, two things which are to a large degree mutually exclusive. There is an overlapping in their function, or they are not at all sure of what their function is. Perhaps they are revolting against their function and wanting someone else's. The teacher envies the evangelist and tries to be an evangelist, or the evangelist looks on the teacher and would like to be a teacher. I only use those by way of illustrating what I mean. It is like that if not as defined in our thought as that - there is dividedness within, uncertainty within, overlapping within, perhaps revolt within, and it creates the unrest of uncertainty, and there is loss to that life, loss to the Lord, and loss to the Body.

Our two steps then, are, first of all, that there is the fact that every member is to function distinctly and definitely. Secondly, that we are to come by the Spirit into the realisation and recognition of what our place or function is. And covering both of those things, of course, is the due measure of each several part. This is the way of growth, our growth, our increase, and the increase of the Body of which we are a part.

Function Made Known in the Church

Well now, that creates a lot of difficulties, and you are not seeing your way through, but we are only going a step at a time. How is this to be? How can we come to this place? How can we know? How can we function in this way with a knowledge of what our function is? The Lord has given a very full answer to that, quite a strong, positive answer. It is a very big answer. The answer is the church, the Body. "Go into the city and it shall be told thee what thou must do" (Acts 9:6). "The Holy Spirit said, Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them" (Acts 13:2). It is in relatedness, not in separateness, independence, isolation or detachment; I am not speaking merely about physical detachment. You can be at all the meetings and with the Lord's people all the time and be as detached as though never there at all. You can be mentally detached, a spectator, a passenger, a critic, an observer, a watcher, still be standing back to see how things are going, whether your ideas are going to be borne out, whether your fears are going to be confirmed, whether your judgments are going to be proved right.

Dear friends, let us say at once, anything in that nature will defeat God's end in you and defeat God's end in the Body of Christ where you are concerned. The answer to the question, "How am I to know, and knowing, how am I to be in the way of functioning?" is the church. You take the idea of the body very practically and very literally, and you see how utterly impossible it would be for a body to be in health, in strength and in growth, in maturity and in function, if in the body some member stood back from the rest with some reservations and questionings and fears. Anything like that would throw the whole body out, and the physician or the surgeon would have to say, "Somehow we have got to get that organ into line, into adjustment, so that as a part of the whole it works in perfect sympathy, in perfect harmony, is really a living part of the whole in a practical way."

Well, it is like that, that is the Lord's way: it is relatedness and devoutness to relatedness. That is the answer. There has to be a complete deliverance from the obsession with what is merely personal as such - *my* ministry, *my* place, *my* vindication - that is a false way of applying this principle of individual responsibility. The individual responsibility is a related and corporate thing, it is not a personal thing. It is an individual thing in a related way, not a personal thing in an unrelated way, not a detached thing. Oh, how the Lord's interests in individual lives and in His people as companies (and therefore in the whole Body of Christ), how His interests have been retarded and brought under arrest because the members of the Body have not really just been merged into the Body and

got everything as in the Body. They have stood around and tried to draw out to themselves, use for themselves; the very opportunities presented by a company of the Lord's people have been appropriated personally for self-expression and self-realisation. They have not just been merged into and in a personal way (I am using that word 'personal' now in this wrong sense of personal) lost their identity in the whole, simply become swallowed up in the whole. They have not got there and therefore there has been loss.

You see, we have to grow up in this. There is no such thing as just coming on it from the outside as appendages, accretions. It has got to be a growing up; it is an organism in which we grow up and out of which we find expression. We cannot come to the church as from the outside and say, "We are going to attach ourselves here, and this is going to be where we fulfil our ministry". We cannot do that. The whole Christian system is wrong when it does that, and I am touching things of tremendous consequence and significance.

How far you can follow me I do not know, but this is really getting down to the inside of the troubles. I am certain that the weakness, the poverty, of the Christian church today, speaking generally, is due to these very things, due to this wrong order which is all an outside system of attachment and coming in from the outside and fastening upon and taking up, whereas the Lord supports from the inside and you have to grow up and grow out and fulfil your function as something that has grown up.

Now, that is the very heart of things. "Go into the city and it shall be told you", and where was it? It was there in the church, in relatedness, not in independence, that Paul got his first enlightenment as to the Lord's will for him. Then to Antioch later, and for twelve or thirteen months that man in the church at Antioch, having to come in on a common basis with others and live as a part of some thing, an organism. Not until he had got into the thing, lived in it as an organic part of it, not as somebody distinctive - because here are men mentioned who were the men in charge, responsible men there, and Paul and Barnabas are not among them, they are in a subject place there, in eternal recognition and predestination greater than all the rest and yet in a subject place, and in that right as from the inside - the Holy Spirit said, "Separate me Barnabas and Saul." They had had to grow up in the thing and go forth as out from something in which they had become an organic part, and that was tremendous increase to them, to that local company, and to the whole Body of Christ. The Lord would simply say, "At the beginning I did not recognise you as anybody in particular; I recognised you as a part of a whole, you have to learn to be part of a whole, to lose your own personal name, position, everything else, all that is personal, in the whole. You are a vital faculty in the whole, but it is related. It cannot be something in itself as apart. You have got to learn how to let yourself sink into the rest and come up as a part of the whole." The most difficult thing for some people is to work in a team. We have often used this word 'subjection'. I have almost got afraid of it, I do not like it because people do not like it, but there it is - to be subject in the Body of Christ, in the church, to the Lord.

Oh yes, a lot of people are prepared to be subject to the Lord, but that is something between them and the Lord; they are going to be individuals apart. But now the Lord's method of applying the principle of subjection is the church. It is always the church, it is the Body, subjection to the Lord is shown there. "Go into the city", the Holy Spirit said. That is the way of increase. Until we have left personal ground, we are not in the way of fulness. This is not just theory, technique. These are spiritual realities. If some of us were to bear testimony, we could give a fairly strong testimony along this line. We know how the Lord dealt with us along the line of our personal ministry, our personal reputation, and broke the whole thing, brought it to an end and demanded a position where it was a common ground with others. Paul was of that principle in spirit all the time.

I do like to see this at work in principle. He went to Corinth and he found two people, a husband and wife there, Aquila and Priscilla. And what happened? He discovered that they were of the same trade as himself - tent-making. Paul, the great apostle, this man chosen of God for this great work, in the course of fulfilling his great historic apostleship, sits down on a stool to make tents. And how does it work out? Alongside of each other, these three make tents, and Aquila and Priscilla are getting something, seeing, coming into light and increase, and the next thing you read is that there was a man mighty in the Scriptures, tremendously zealous for the truth, a great fighter, an eloquent man - Apollos. With all his knowledge of the Scriptures and with all his zeal and his eloquence, there is something seriously lacking in the man and his ministry which lack is meaning distinct limitation of a company of believers among whom he is ministering. They had to say, "We have not so much as heard that the Holy Spirit is", and it was Aquila and Priscilla who showed him the way more perfectly and delivered him from his limitations. So that Apollos came out into a large place. Here is enlargement, increase, and where did it begin? The increase of Apollos and all that it meant through Apollos, the increase of Aquila and Priscilla, was Paul coming down on that very common basis of tent-making alongside of people and talking to them about the Lord (Acts 18 and 19). Nothing very ecclesiastical about that, nothing very official about that, nothing very outstandingly apostolic about that in the official sense. It is coming down on to the basis of organic life. Increase is that way.

If we are ministers, if we are wanting some position, to be marked out in some particular way as the Lord's servants, that may be the way of loss. The Lord would say all the time, "Get in and get down". The way up is the way down. The way out is the way in. Get right in, one hundred percent inside, no passengers, but a bit of the crew taking responsibility; right inside spiritually, but right in. It is the way of increase: down and in.

Until we have learned how to subject our minds and our wills to the Lord in the church, we are not going to know what our function is. That seems to me to be undoubtedly the principle bound up with the laying on of hands. It is referred to. Paul says, "Stir up the gift that is in thee through the laying on of my hands" (2 Tim. 1:6), by prophecy with the laying on of hands. When hands were laid on Timothy and prayer prayed over him, prayer took such a line as to indicate what this man's work would be and what this man's gift would be. Prayer took some definite line which was indicative of the man's life and ministry, but that coming to the laying on of hands was not something just official and ecclesiastical. It was Timothy coming into the place of subjection in the house of God, and there again you have the principle. It was not apostles alone who laid on hands. In Paul's own case - and how the Lord carried the principle in the case of Paul to its fullest expression - the principle might have been fulfilled in a very unusual extraordinary way in the case of Paul, seeing who he was, surely we had better get the greatest apostles to lay hands on him, but the Lord did not choose an apostle at all. He chose a man of whom we know absolutely nothing. This man in Damascus, not an apostle, laid his hands upon him. And, so far as the men in Antioch were concerned, who were they? Who were the men who laid hands on Paul and Barnabas? I do not know who they were. Their names are given, one or two things are said about them, but who where they? They are not apostolic names. They are men of God, devoted to the Lord and His interests, taking spiritual responsibility in the local company, and they - ordinary men, I should say, nothing historically outstanding - were called upon by the Holy Spirit to lay their hands upon these two great men, one of them the greatest of the apostolic company.

The Lord did press the principle with Paul. He kept it right down there and it is subjection. If there had been the slightest thing about Paul which said, "Well, I am Paul; Jesus appeared to me from heaven personally and told me my life-work and what a great life-work I was called to, and He has told Ananias that I am a chosen vessel. I expect something more than this for my ordination; I expect them to bring the archbishop for me!" If there had been anything like that, it would have been

violating the very thing that was intended of God to realise the fullest end, or, to put it the other way: this merging, letting go, this subjection of mind, subjection of will, subjection of heart to the Lord in the church was essential to the realisation of the Lord's purpose, to the indication of what the function was. We will be in ignorance until we get there and make it possible for the Lord to speak to us in the church, through the church. The Holy Spirit will indicate church-wise what our function is. We can know in that way.

Function Often Contrary to Nature

Now let me say this one other word here. It will be necessary for us to prove our subjection to the Lord by our willingness to function in a way which might not naturally appeal to us. So often it is necessary for the Lord to contradict nature in order to get spiritual increase. Usually it is that way. We do not always make increase, really grow, by having all that we like, by having things just as we would like them. That is the way to make spoilt children. That is the way to spoil, and usually growth comes in exactly the opposite way, by countering and contradicting our natural likes and preferences and calling upon us to serve the Lord in some way against which we naturally revolt. That is true. None of us here can speak very much of our spiritual measure, but if we have in any way progressed and come into a larger measure of the Lord and we can say by the grace of God that is so, I think we have to say that it is because of this contrary way of the Lord with us.

You may not believe it when I tell you that the most difficult thing for me in this world is to minister. I would sooner be doing anything than be in the ministry. Give me some machinery to handle and I am happy. Call upon me to have to minister to the Lord's people in this way - it does not fall in with my natural make-up at all. It is difficult, but it is the Lord's way. I could usually turn round and run out of the door when there is a meeting in view. Let me get away. I am not holding myself up as an example, but I say this: that I believe by putting me in the way of something not easy to nature, for which I have no natural fitness and aptness, the Lord has taught me much and the Lord has done something, and it is like that. Here is where the shoe pinches. This is where the principle of subjection in the house of God really becomes something very practical, a real test.

Do you not see that multitudes of young men and women have given up business and gone into "Christian" work because it appeals to them? And the fact is that a great number of them in after years have come to wish that they could get back again and out of "Christian" work. If they had known, they would never have taken that step. We come, sooner or later, to find that our natural aptness and liking for things does not get us very far spiritually. There has got to be something on the one hand which makes us know that only the Lord can get us through this, can do this, and if the Lord does not do it we are not sufficient for this; there is nothing in us to do it. And, on the other hand, that the Lord has called us to something that does not just go with the grain always, does not just find us in any natural aptitude and taste and liking; one with it. But here is the realm and the line in which strength of spirit is called for and therefore spiritual growth to prove the Lord, to know the Lord, for it is a most fatal thing to have a natural facility for spiritual things; it is when you have to be enlarged by pressure, and the enlargement is by being stretched, and sometimes stretched to breaking point.

In this matter of coming right in, subjection to the Lord is a very practical thing in the church, but it is the way of enlargement, it is the way to fulness and there is no other way. It is the way to know our calling and to fulfil it.

If we can, by the grace of God, sense or see at all that to which the Lord has called us, what our function is, we have got to settle on that and be contented and fully occupied with that. The enemy

will be all the time trying to divert us onto something else and lure and draw us onto some other line, to make us discontented and divide us in some way.

The Need for a Holy Spirit Governed and Ordered Church

Of course, all I have said leads up to one other thing, that is, the need for a Holy Spirit governed and ordered church. There has got to be a church, a representation of the Body, in which all this can be, and that raises one of the big questions of today. A lot of people are saying, "Well, in the New Testament that was all right, for apostolic days it was all right. If there is a definite and clear system of things there, if there is to be found a proper order there, that was for apostolic days. We are in times of ruins, the church is in ruins. It is no use trying to make anything out of ruin. The only thing we can do now is to preach the gospel and minister the Word and abandon this whole hope of ever seeing a church on New Testament lines again!" Are you prepared to accept that? Let us put it in another way.

If this was the Lord's appointed way to fulness, has He revealed any other way to fulness? Has the Lord dismissed His Body now as the channel, the vehicle, and instrument for bringing to fulness? We can put the question another way. Look today at Christianity. What has brought about the ruin, if it is ruin? What has brought about disruption and the present state of things? Has it not been the leaving of this very ground that has produced this? What have you got now? You have autocrats in the church, individuals under whose one own hat all the management is vested, dictators: men coming in in a personal way with their own personal ends, objects, interest, dominations, likes, preferences, intentions - all these things running riot in the sphere of the church and many other things which are just the opposite of this organic life of subjection. No autocrats here, no dictators here. We are tent-makers. We are all of us down on this common basis of men and women in Christ.

You remember how Paul put it, "Someone caught up to the third heaven and shown unspeakable things which it is not lawful for a man to utter". How did he describe that person? "I know a man in Christ..." (2 Cor. 12:4). Not, "I knew a great apostle, a great servant of Jesus Christ, a great marked-out vessel of the testimony!" "I know a *man in Christ*." That is all - a man in Christ. And leaving that ground of one Body, leaving it in spirit, in principle, in action, has resulted in the situation which there is today, and there will be no getting back into the way of spiritual fulness until the Lord does have something which more approximates to His thought and His appointment as to spiritual growth. It has got to be like that.

Well, I have wrestled with this question and its many problems of the church, but I cannot see that the Lord wants us to abandon that. I cannot see that there is going to be real spiritual growth by abandoning it. My own experience and the experience of many others is that this is still the Lord's way. We are not interested in setting up things called 'churches', that is not the point. It is an organic spiritual something that is an expression of the Holy Spirit's Lordship and the sovereignty of the Lord's life in a company of people. It is that, and that is the way of fulness. Much more, of course, is bound up with this, but I do trust that the Lord has said something that is going to mean a great deal. You will see, I am sure, the main principles, the main thought. I do ask you to take it to heart, because I am concerned, and you are concerned, about increase, enlargement, growth, fulness; for ourselves individually and for the company. It must be this way.

Let me say again as I close, we have got to get in and down, nothing on stilts, standing off; no reservations. We are in, or out. Let us ask the Lord to get us right in, welded and flowing as one; not so many, but one.