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## "In Spirit and In Truth"

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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John 4:23

It is no exaggeration to say that the briefest phrase from the lips of Jesus Christ contains a depth, wealth and cruciality of significance that is inexhaustible. The above clause is an example of this. In the first place it - with its context - was used to mark the change in a long and powerful tradition. A system and tradition so strong and deep-rooted as, in any questioning of it, to rouse the most vehement and deadly wrath and antagonism of a whole nation, dispersed throughout the whole world. The book of the Bible in which this phrase occurs is just full of this so terrible antagonism. The words not only indicate the transition from one long dispensation to another, altogether different but they go right to the very heart of the situation which is stirring and troubling Christendom today as it has never before done. Christendom, which means everything bearing the name of Christianity, is moved in our time in every one of its many and varied circles by an enforced necessity - to save its very life - to find a way of unity.

Never before in the Christian era has the word 'Church' been so much, so often, and so seriously upon the lips of those included in the word 'Christianity'. From the biggest to the smallest communities within its compass this word 'Church' and its unity is the subject of convocations, conferences, councils, committees and conclaves. All this betrays a deep and serious concern, and when that is true of anything it implies that things are not right. What is called 'Christianity', and what has come to be called 'the Church', has become a tradition, an institution, and a system quite as fixed, rooted and established as ever Judaism was, and it will be no less costly to *fundamentally* change it than was the case with Judaism. Superficial adjustments may be made, and *are* being made, but a very heavy price is attached to the change which is necessary to really solve the great problem. It may very well be, as in the time of the Lord, that the essential light will

not be given to very many because God knows that they would never pay the price. It may only be a "Remnant" - as of old - who will be led into God's answer because they will meet the demands at all costs. Therefore we cannot be too hopeful in regard to all that is going on in this connection. It may be that this so widespread stirring is in the sovereignty of God intended for "the sifting of the hearts of men".

The sifting may very well be in the direction of a winnowing of the variety of conceptions of what the Church is.

Somehow, in the course of time, the word 'Church' has become associated with a kind of building or architecture, for that is now the common word for such places. Or again, it is used of congregations and assemblies of people, physical bodies. Sometimes it is employed to define a worldwide body of people comprehensively called 'Christians'. Within that widest circle there are all the many denominational 'churches', too numerous to tabulate. The sifting may mean that we have to recognize that the true Church is not the aggregate of human physical bodies. It is not a society tied together by either a title or a creed, i.e. a set of beliefs. It is not constituted by a certain procedure called 'New Testament Order' or practice. All these externalities, physical, temporal, material, etc., will go, as they have done in numerous places in history, and are doing under the stresses of persecution in wide areas of the world.

But with the passing of the material, the places, the physical, the *true* Church is unaffected and it is *one*; not divided and not many. It is here that, in the words of John 4:23 (and context), Jesus has made more than a statement, He has defined the Church for this whole dispensation. He has peremptorily dismissed Jerusalem and its Temple and Gerizim in Samaria, and with them everything of the same type and order, and has enunciated the principle which defines and designates the alone true Church. If we are to take Jesus seriously, as we hear Him in this Gospel by John, then buildings however ornate and magnificent, and congregations of religious people however great, and ancient traditions and systems however they may have been *sovereignly* used by God, are *not* the true Church! There are *many* things within this compass which are thought to go to make up and belong to the Church, but really do not do so. It is significant how, when a man or people walk with God, the road leads from the outward to the inward, and how so much of that which was before thought to be so important, just falls off, and spiritual reality dispenses with so much ecclesiastical paraphernalia and trapping. What, then, was that essential and ultimate to which Christ reduced and sifted everything on the basis and essence of the Church? In finding that we shall find the answer to all divisions, and the secret of true and eternal unity.

When Jesus reduced everything - as in John 4:23 - to "In spirit and in truth" (and note - it was the whole matter of "worship", related to places and ancient systems, that was being dealt with), what really did He mean? If we use a term which sounds difficult, what follows will explain it, we trust, quite amply. The Church is the unity of spiritual personalities.

This, purely, is just what Jesus had been saying with such emphasis and imperativeness to Nicodemus. "Verily, verily" - "Most truly" - "I say." Remembering who Nicodemus was, and what he represented, Jesus emphatically told him that not only was he outside of the Kingdom of Heaven, but that, as he was, with all his religion, tradition, and sincerity, there was a positive embargo upon his entering; the door was fast closed to his kind. The demand and requirement, Jesus categorically stated, was that something should happen which would be a starting of life all over again, and that as a born member of a new and altogether different race, sphere, and nation. In elucidating Nicodemus's perplexity, Jesus made it clear that this is not a physical-body matter, for, as stated elsewhere, "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the Kingdom of Heaven." So, basically, the Kingdom or

the Church is not so many religious physical bodies. What, then, is this "you" that has to be "born from above", "born of the Spirit", in contrast to "that which is born of the flesh"? What is it that - in God's and Heaven's realm - has no existence or place until it is reborn? What is it that, as to union with God, has no life until life is given as by a new birth? The answer of Jesus, and of the New Testament as a whole (which only is Christianity), is that the spirit of man, the "inner man of the heart", "our inward man" *as an entity*, has to have this rebirth. When the spirit of man is referred to, it is not just what is meant when we say of a person: 'He - or she - has a nice, a pleasant spirit', or 'is nice-spirited'. That is abstract. The spirit in man is the essential personality of that order which belongs to the Kingdom of Heaven: it is a different order from all others. It is, as Jesus said, the alone and direct result of the action of the Spirit of God, and it is essentially different from every other religious order.

The Church, we repeat, is the organic unity of such spiritual personalities, and such alone. The Church will never be anything or anywhere more in existence, greater or smaller, than the spiritual personalities and spiritual measure of such as have come into being - *with God* - by this definite operation of the Holy Spirit; not by means of sacraments, or any other *outward* means, but by a Divine fiat, an *act* of God. Sacraments are not spiritual, they are temporal and symbolic. The context of our governing words is: "God is Spirit". That is *nature*, not firstly disposition. It is a kind of being, the essential order of being. Then Jesus went on to emphasize that relationship, intercourse, oneness with God, is only possible when man becomes - by Divine act - basically and essentially a spiritually reborn creation; what Paul termed: "He that is spiritual". The Church will never be - locally or universally - more perfect than are the spiritual personalities which comprise it. The buildings and the old human bodies will go. The "spirits of just men made perfect" will be clothed upon with a body "not made with hands", but, like the newborn spirit, "a body which is from above". (See Hebrews 12:24 and 1 Corinthians 15.)

Hence, the focus of God's training and "chastening" is as by "the Father of *our spirits*" (Hebrews 12:9).

The Church begins with spiritual birth. It grows by (a) the multiplication of spiritual births, and (b) the growth of the spiritual personalities.

The only *seen* Church is the character of Christ in persons. Bodies are an essential media. We are not thinking of unembodied or disembodied spirits. We are not in the realm of mysticism. Spiritual life is essentially practical because we are spiritually developed by all the practical experiences of bodily life. While our bodies are but the 'vessels' of ourselves, they *are* the vessels, and 'in these we do groan'. We do not accept the 'Christian Science' tenet that "matter is an illusion, and at most evil".

We *must* take time to be very clear on this side of this great matter, because it will be so easy for us to be misunderstood; and it would be so likely that it would be said that we are just spiritualizing away the Church. The human, physical bodies of Christians are as essential to the Church as they are to man himself as the vehicle of self-expression and presence in this world for practical purposes. This should not need saying, for it would be so absurd to think of the Church as so many spirits without bodies. The same is true of locations. The Church is not an omnipresent spirit, even if governed by the Holy Spirit who is omnipresent. What we are saying - as we believe the New Testament teaches - is that *within* and behind the needed physical and bodily 'temples' the Church is constituted by the regenerated spirits of men and women, in whose spirits the Divine gift of eternal life in Christ Jesus dwells by new birth. This is the *eternal* Church. Physical bodies may pass away and give place to the bodies "like unto his glorious body". Localizations may cease, as they have done from New Testament times onwards. Temporal housings of the Church may - and will - go, sooner or later; but that true Church of "the spirits of just men" is eternal. To see and understand this true

nature of the Church is to have several vital effects. It will show the fallacy of much of the common and prevailing phraseology in relation to the Church - such as 'joining the Church' whether by invitation, constraint, attractions, or any other outward means. The fallacy in our Church mentality and talk is largely responsible for the fallacy that the historic 'church' is in the eyes and minds of so many people today. It is something very misleading. The Church is *not* a composite thing which can be 'joined', any more than is a true family. It is a *spiritual* entity into which we have to be *born* by a begetting of the Father God and born by the Holy Spirit.

Another effect of knowing what the Church truly is will be to solve the whole problem of unity. Unity, according to the New Testament, is not firstly and basically intellectual; neither is it emotional. It is unity of spirit - "One Spirit". The mind may not grasp all the truth as stated, but the spirit can know with assurance that it is the truth. The mind may not be capable of defining error, but the spirit - indwelt by the Holy Spirit - can register that there is something false in the statement. This is how the true Church is safeguarded and preserved.

Then, in what we are pointing to, there is the explanation of an otherwise very puzzling thing. Both Peter, John and Paul lived to see a great decline setting in where the churches were concerned. All in Asia turned from Paul. Peter saw much that made him write strong and faithful words. John saw all those elements of declension about which he wrote in the Revelation. All of these men also knew that their death at the hands of the enemies of Christ was imminent. The outlook was grim and deeply disappointing from every natural standpoint. Apparently the Church was being devastated, and their life work was being desolated. Apparently, we say. Yet all of these men were in spiritual triumph and ascendancy to the end. Why? Just because they knew that the Church and the work, and the deepest truth about believers, was not the outward, but the spiritual and inward, and therefore indestructible. What is truly definable as "Spirit and truth" cannot be prevailed against by the gates (councils) of hades. Deeper than nationalities, temperaments, traditions, 'birth', training, intellect, is God's work in the renewed and indwelt spirit of man, and the bond of spiritual unity can stand heavy strains and stresses.

May the Spirit of Truth use what has been written here to open our eyes to the so much more that the New Testament has to say as to spirit and truth. Call it 'mystical' if you like; or describe it as 'spiritualizing', if you choose; but still the truth is that Christianity has become a religion, a concept, a form, a system, a name. What the one and only authority for the name "Christian" solidly lays down and teaches is that it is a Person; a Person in abiding individual reality, but expanded and reproduced by His own Spirit through new birth to an "elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father". The Church and unity are no more and no less or other than the spiritual presence and measure of Christ. One of the very onerous and exacting obligations thrust upon us by the developments of 'Christianity' is to look *through* its accretions and adoptions, such as adornments, vestments, clericalisms, forms, etc., or the absence of these, and seek for Christ. It may be hard work; it may require the very strong handling of our own likes or dislikes; but it has got to be done, for the Church and unity are not *any one* of these complexions, neither can we *make* the perfect church by composing a complexion. It is that that the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote what is in 2 Corinthians 5, particularly: "...if one died for all, then all died (in Him)... I therefore, from henceforth, view no man carnally..." (Conybeare). Although not here in actual words, but in other places, the Apostle contrasts 'carnal' with 'spiritual', and we should take it that that is what he meant here. He says that he no longer views or knows Christ carnally, i.e. after the flesh, and implies that Christ has now to be known spiritually, so also with Christian men. God help us to keep our carnal selves hidden behind Christ! Also, God help us to - at least - seek to find Christ in others, however little. You will agree that the very effort demanded for this makes the *spiritual* life intensely practical.

This, then, is the Church, and this alone true unity. No wonder that it is a case of "giving diligence (*striving* to maintain) the unity of the Spirit". It demands "striving". If we project ourselves, our natural selves, or carnal selves, in front of Christ we - at least - injure the unity and the Body of Christ.

Here we must stop for the present. But surely we have begun to verify and prove our statement at the beginning: 'Any brief phrase from the lips of the Lord Jesus contains an inexhaustible fullness.' So it is with "In spirit and in truth".