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The Nature and Purpose of This Ministry

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 unwillingly — 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."

Having summed up the whole matter as an undercutting of the whole of Christianity as it is now known, as a crystallized and set system and tradition, we went on to indicate that, far from having a new and separate *movement* in view or intention, it is just a matter of seeing — we believe by a deep and painful work of the Lord in us — the real and essential significance of Christ Himself. In this further part of the explanation I am going to concentrate upon that point of *seeing*, and add a little as to its inevitable consequences.

Surely we shall not find disagreement when we say that an intelligent reading of the New Testament leaves no one in doubt that a true Christian life — i. e. *true* Christianity — in the case of every *true* believer rests upon a fact with two sides. On the one side, man is totally and helplessly blind to the things of the Spirit of God, and inclusively to the Person, nature and meaning of Christ. He is just without the faculty of sight in that realm, and it requires a supernatural act of creative power to give him that faculty with its resultant knowledge. On the other side, a *true* believer, a *true* Christian, is one who is in the good of that supernatural creative miracle. Is that, or is that not, the teaching of the whole New Testament — "Gospels" and "Letters"?

There are further aspects of this matter.

One is that what is true of the natural birth is symbolic of spiritual new birth. Sight comes with birth — if the child is normal. But, while the faculty is perfect, its use and value are not. It is diffuse, uncoordinated and largely unintelligent. There comes a point at which vision becomes co-ordinated, focussed, and intelligence takes charge, so that the child knows the difference between things and cannot be put off with alternatives. But this faculty is capable of ever-increasing development, and things formerly undreamt of — although available — become possible of apprehension.

Another thing is that there is really no *true* substitute for sight. We may, if we are physically blind, be told of things that the seeing see; we may have them carefully and continually described to us; as things in existence we may be very familiar with them, and even take them for granted. We ourselves may go so far as to talk about them and give a description of or dissertation upon them. But the fact remains that it is all secondhand — just information, indirectly acquired.

Well, there you are. That position, in one or other of its aspects, is the position of literally multitudes of those who are called Christians. There are those — and they are very many — who have been born again and have the faculty of spiritual sight, but who, even after years, have the faculty neither coordinated nor developed. They still see only as babes (1 Cor. 3:1-2). There may be a true beginning in experience and then the acquiring of a whole mass of the common acceptance of Christian interpretation and procedure. This includes a reading and knowing of the content of the Bible without the vital revelation of its significance which makes everything in life tremendously different.

This is where we ourselves were. Our position was that of the generally accepted evangelical Christian world. All the fundamentals of the evangelical faith were most surely believed and preached. The system of denominations as 'regiments of the one army' (as it is commonly put) was accepted, or more or less taken for granted. We were in one of these 4 regiments because we believed that it was as good as — or perhaps a bit better than — the others. We had our Bible Schools and lectures, in which we gave the substance, content, and — as we believed — the meaning of the various parts of that sacred book. We were tremendously in earnest, and not a bit

lacking in evangelical zeal and passion. Much more could be said about our enterprises and activities in work for God.

How the crisis came about and what led to it we should need to take all our available space to tell; suffice it to say that the main factor was a deep and growing spiritual dissatisfaction and a strengthening sense that there was something so much greater in the heart of God than we had discovered. This led to a strong quest for all that He would have us know. At length the crisis came, and that was done which answered the cry of need and revolutionised everything. As we have already said, it undercut Christianity as we had known it. That which happened was an opening of our eyes, and the immediate result was that we saw that we had hitherto never really seen. We had the doctrines, the statements, the truths, the Scriptures, and we earnestly taught them. Then the thing happened *in us*, and while the subject-matter of the Faith remained the same, we were brought into a new world of life, light, liberty and fulness, so that the *power* of the truth made all that world of difference. We date a revolutionary divide from then, as to traditional Christianity with earnest belief on the one hand, and a living experience of Christ in so much greater meaning, with an open heaven, on the other hand.

It is no new doctrine or information to say that we saw the meaning of Christ's Cross as setting aside one whole species of creation — man as we know him, even at his best and most devout — and thereby making room for another order of creation as represented by the Heavenly Man — Jesus Christ; but for that to be brought home with the mighty impact of the Holy Spirit is nothing short of shattering! Its implicates are comprehensive and all-inclusive, and its application cataclysmic! The inclusive result of such a foundational thing is to open the way for God to do things right out from Himself.

After this initial basic revelation, it was not long before the opened heaven and the opened eyes meant a seeing of the real nature of the Church. Here again institutionalism, traditionalism, denominationalism, interdenominationalism, undenominationalism (as such) just made their exit from our mentality and disappeared as part of our system of things. Indeed all such things came to be but a denial of that reality of the "One Body". But be it clearly understood that it was not even a new conception of the Church, as something in itself; it was not just another Church concept. It was a realisation of the fact that Christ — the Heavenly Man — can be neither comprehended by nor fitted into any denominator of this world, be it national, racial, ecclesiastical, temperamental, or any other of the marks which divide down here. As Christ is a new and heavenly Man, so the Church as His Body is a new and heavenly thing, *above* all sections, not *uniting* them. "There is neither..." says Paul, not 'There are both' or 'all'.

When this had broken upon us with such emancipating effect, and ministry related to Christ in this realm was given, we found that spiritually hungry people of various denominations were coming for food, and meeting on the ground of Christ only.

In the sovereignty of God, and without any seeking or action of ours, the issue of denominational connection was forced upon us from without, and we were compelled to face the issue of either abandoning our spiritual position, going back on all that the Lord had done, or of taking ground in keeping with our 'open heaven' and continuing our ministry to *all* the people of God, never raising the question of 'connections'.

This we did, but, to our amazement, while we only thought of the oneness of all true children of God,

the first charge levelled against us was that of seeking to form a new sect and dividing God's people. To be quite frank, it was an almost stunning blow to discover that what had been so marked with the sovereign hand of God, so living and spontaneous, and so meeting the spiritual need of a growing number of disappointed and hungry Christians, was being looked upon by the evangelical Christian world with icy suspicion and complete misunderstanding. In our innocence and guilelessness we had never thought other than that the 'All one in Christ' position would be heartily appreciated and understood. What we did discover was that, rather than its being regarded as something which would meet a growing need, a heavy wall of ostracism, isolation, misrepresentation, and much untruth was being built around us to cut us off from fellowship and ministry. "Everywhere spoken against" is as true of us as it was of Paul's ministry, and, had it not been of God, we could not have survived these twenty-five years — much less have known an increase, expansion, and deepening — completely without a single one of the methods, recourses, and means of organized enterprise. Indeed, we have besought the Lord to bring us to an end immediately He saw that our existence in His interest was no longer justified.

A main factor in our foundation, from the beginning, has been John 2:19: "The Son can do nothing out from himself, but what he seeth the Father doing..." If that were true of Him, how much more must it be of us!

But we did not set out to try to vindicate ourselves. The part which relates to the painful disillusionment as to reactions to the effect of an opening of our eyes is really only included to lead to the point that, as it was with Paul and others, it is ever a costly and lonely way to see the heavenly as so different from and other than the earthly! So the Lord Himself found it, and today perhaps our surprise is that we should ever have been surprised at this. In a part of the dispensation when — because his time is shortening — the Prince of the Power of the Air is flooding the whole world with suspicion, mistrust, distortion, falsehood, and fear, it is grievous to see how this atmosphere is being breathed in by the people of God, so that more than ever relationships are affected by it. Perhaps it is here that an 'opening of the eyes of the heart' is needed, but because such a working of the "Spirit of wisdom and revelation" means so very much in the Church's ascendancy over his kingdom. Satan will take full advantage of the slightest opportunity to use suitable ground available or to create phantoms, which nevertheless are very real to those who accept them.

The focal point of this Editorial is just this. The Bible itself makes it perfectly clear that it is possible to be in possession of the Scriptures, to know them very well, even to be passionately devoted to them, and yet at the same time to be utterly and violently in contradiction to their true meaning. This was true of Saul of Tarsus. It was true of Peter at the house of Cornelius (for Leviticus 11 seemed to forbid his doing what the voice from heaven demanded). It was said of those who "killed the Prince of Life" that it was because "they knew... not... the voices of the prophets which are read [in their hearing] every sabbath" (Acts 13:27). So we may have our Bibles and build up every contradictory position with the — seeming — support of Scripture. What is needed is "a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him": and that was prayed for by the Apostle for *believers* — not for the unsaved — and moreover for believers who had a very real "first love", namely, the Ephesians. It will cost and lead to a lonely way, requiring much courage. The Lord give us that courage.