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Email: info@austin-sparks.net

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The Street of Pure Gold

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*"And he shewed me a river of water of life, bright as crystal,
proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb,
in the midst of the street thereof" (Revelation 22:1-2)*

Passing from the general description of the holy city in Revelation 21 the apostle John then said that he was shown it as consisting of one single and central street, with a river flowing down the centre of that street of pure gold. The spiritual significance of the vision is the perfect oneness of Christ as revealed in a beautiful unity in which He has the central place. This is God's masterpiece, this unity of the fellowship of the Spirit which makes Christ and His members one. By means of this city God plans to minister to the whole range of His universe. The nations are to walk in its light and to find health from the leaves of its tree of life. God purposes to minister blessing to His universe from the central position of the Church in which Christ is the central Figure.

If this is so, then we must believe that this element of oneness is a vital principle, and that even now the Lord is working to produce and maintain it. Although the final objective of God is future, it must surely cast its rays upon the present. When the glorious city comes suddenly into view it may seem to come 'out of the blue', but in fact it will only represent the final emergence of that which has been spiritually coming all the time. There is a sense in which each one of us is sending up in advance those spiritual values in Christ which are being developed in us. When we follow the simile of the bride, we think of the garments being prepared now, as some excellency, some beauty, some virtue

of Christ is woven like a thread into the fabric of the bridal garments. We will 'put on' Christ then because we are learning to put Him on now. It seems that in a similar way, the material of the heavenly city is being prepared now. It is true that every part of it represents some aspect of Christ, but once again it should be realised that these expressions of Christ are to be formed in us now. The consummation will be seen later, but the city is being spiritually formed now.

What will be true ultimately concerning the eternal vocation of the Church as the metropolis of God's new universe, throws some light on what should be true here and now. In eternity God's glory is to be ministered on a basis of absolute unity. First of all this means oneness with the Lord Himself. The Church can fulfill God's eternal purpose only by oneness with the thoughts of God as expressed in His Son. It is not enough to contemplate a feature of divine unity as illustrated by the one single street and the life-giving river flowing down the middle of it; we need to ask ourselves what this implies for us here on earth. Surely the implication is that among God's people there should be that basic unity of the Spirit which makes possible a free-flowing ministry of life. There is no need to insist on a uniformity of language or procedure. Even where this exists in outward matters there can still be deep tensions of spirit and dividedness of heart. And even where people differ in unimportant matters there can still be that all-important unity of fellowship in Christ. It is this unity which is essential to the flow of the Spirit.

Satan himself lays emphasis on this point by his constant strategic movement against the power and value of any service for Christ by introducing divisions and seeking to perpetuate them. He does not mind talk about oneness; in some ways he does not so much object to doctrinal agreement of an external nature; but he is set positively and persistently against a deep-down inwrought oneness, for he knows the powerful impact of such a testimony. So the picture of the river flowing down the street is a challenge to us all. It is, of course, a challenge to the Church as a whole, since the unity of the Spirit is not sectional but all-embracing. It follows, though, that the practical impact of the challenge is felt at local levels and in the assemblies where we are found. Is the river flowing there? If not, is this lack due to basic disunity? Are there many streets, side avenues and private roads, instead of the King's highway?

The challenge finally confronts each individual, for the Lord Jesus promised that the result of a vital faith in Him would be the outflow of rivers of living water (John 7:38). So the initial unity must be that of our own personal relationship with Christ. Before we begin to consider our church, we need to examine our own lives and to ask if those around us are finding refreshment and life as the Spirit flows out from us to them. It is not enough to meditate on the beauty of the golden street with its crystal-clear river if we think of it only in terms of future prospects and not of present fulfilment. So while we gratefully enjoy John's prevision of eternal glory, we do well to ask what it should mean for us here and now.

John could say: "He showed me...". He was reporting what he had himself seen. But is it not relevant that each one of us, in reading and hearing the Word, should be able gratefully to affirm: "He showed *me*...". Just as John could hardly have conceived these heavenly wonders if the Lord had not first said to him: "Come, and I will show you...", so we cannot appreciate the spiritual significance of this matter until the Lord Himself has revealed it to us. We should be able to say in all humility, "He showed me...". But if this is true, if we really have received revelation, then what we have seen ought to have a tremendous practical effect upon our lives. How can I rightly claim to have seen this wonderful truth of spiritual fellowship if it does not find practical expression in my life? How can I talk about the holy city, the heavenly bride of the Lamb, without any outworking of the principles in

me now? Surely the test of whether we have seen is to be found in what happens to us and in us. I do not believe that there can be an effective divine showing without there being some result. It is surely most perilous to accumulate teaching concerning holy truths, perhaps even to disseminate that teaching, while all the time there is a minimal outworking of them in our experience. The teaching can do more harm than good, for it can deceive people into imagining that they are in the good of things just because they are informed about them. We must always test our assumed knowledge by the practical effect which it can be shown to produce.

In the last chapter of the Bible, as in the first, the double emphasis is on the Spirit and on life. In Genesis we are told that the very first indication of divine activity was the brooding of the Spirit of God, and then followed ever new and ever more wonderful expressions of life. When we come to the last chapter of the Revelation we find the Spirit with the bride calling: "... he that is athirst let him come: he that will, let him take of the water of life freely". So again we have the Spirit and life. In a sense this is a key to the whole Bible. In the Old Testament the Spirit is symbolised in many ways, as water, fire, oil and so on, but always related in some way or other to the matter of life. In the New Testament this is much more clearly emphasised. The last book, the book of consummation, has the Spirit and life as its two most prominent features. It opens with John's statement that he was in the Spirit on the Lord's day, and then seven times over in the letters to the churches, the call is for those who will listen to what the Spirit has to say in the churches. Running right alongside is the question of life. In the Spirit John saw and heard the Living One, the Lord Jesus, in terms of resurrection life. As the seven-fold fullness of the Spirit is referred to, we realise that His lamps of fire are directed to the churches in a quest for the one supreme experience which should be theirs, even the fullness of life. The real test of whether those believers were moving towards the Church's goal was, Are people meeting Christ through you? Is virtue flowing out to others, as it did from the garments of our Lord? Our very vocation here on earth is to be witnesses of His life and to minister that life to others around us. Individually and in our churches, we are meant to be life centres.

One of the churches was told: "... thou hast a name that thou livest, and thou art dead..." (Revelation 3:1-3). Names are no use to the Lord. Whether the name sounds good, whether it is Scriptural, whether it has a long tradition; these are of no interest to the Lord and have no value in His sight unless His own life and love are flowing out through us. And there can be no doubt that this life expresses itself in oneness. If the Holy Spirit is really having His way among the Lord's people, they cannot be divided. In eternity there will be a golden street. Even now may His love so triumph in us, His people, that the river of life is freed to carry life to the thirsty souls around us!