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Understanding of the Times

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Some Observations and An Appeal by the Editor

In his "Holy War" John Bunyan's spiritual acumen is rarely more impressive than in that point in the enemy's strategy to capture Mansoul where he orders that Mr. Understanding - the Town Clerk - must be put in a dark dungeon where he cannot see what is going on. The Apostle Paul has given us no small emphasis upon the importance and value of spiritual understanding, and the New Testament contains a great deal of evidence as to that importance. Would to God that we - His people - were more awake to the nature and meaning of currents, trends, and happenings in our own time! David's kingdom was strengthened in the day of its establishment after the death of Saul by the men of Issachar "that had understanding of the times". Our Lord's kingdom surely needs people so endowed. The spheres in which this gift or quality is needed are both those of the Lord's movements, and those of the enemy's, and such perception would be a great strengthening to the Church and the people of God. While we do not claim to be greatly endowed in this way, there are some vital and big matters concerning which no great illumination is necessary, and we venture to point these out. For the moment we confine ourselves to only two, but two which are very far reaching and inclusive of many more. The first has to do with

The Church.

There is an almost astounding movement in our time in this connection, and it has two major aspects. The New Testament can be said to be - in a large proportion of its contents - a document

containing God's conception, election, calling, and constitution of the Church for its eternal vocation, and it can truly be said that God has bound Himself to the Church in a very full and utter way. He has made it clear that *His* means and method of fulfilling His eternal counsels concerning His Son is 'Churchwise': that the normal channel of His approach to and meeting of men is His Church. Of course, this means the Church as constituted, indwelt, and governed by His Son as "head over all things" to it. This Divinely revealed and introduced Church all too soon lost its original character and effectiveness, toward the end of the apostolic age, and, for the most part, it has been other than at the beginning ever since, with few worthy representations, except here and there. But God has never abandoned His original conception and appointment. Sooner or later it would be brought home to Christendom that His way and means are indispensable to its very survival. That time has now come! Never was there a time when so many books were being published, and so many conferences being held, on the subject of the Church as at this present time. The matter is - perhaps - not even second to evangelism, for evangelism resolves itself invariably into the Church question, and is so largely determined as to its abiding value by it.

What we are going to mention is not a verdict either way upon the World Council of Churches (here we pass no judgment for or against, that is not our object at the moment), but it is of no small significance that a body representing almost every denomination of Christendom should make the pronouncements that it has made.

In the great gatherings of this body in Amsterdam the subject chosen was 'The Order of God and the Disorder of Man'. This was afterward altered to 'Man's Disorder and God's Design'. This was a reconsideration of the New Testament revelation of the Church, and was a tacit condemnation of the departure therefrom. Later this great body was found using freely a phrase which has almost become a slogan: 'These man-made divisions must go!' For centuries these 'divisions' have been upheld and championed as part of the sovereign ways of God to recover or preserve certain specific features of Divine truth. It has been said again and again that the denominations were raised up by God for this purpose (no matter how they contradicted one another). Now it is 'these *man-made* divisions'. What lies behind this change and new face? Nothing less and other than the realisation that for its very survival and effective testimony the Church must reassert its unity. While we do not for a moment think that the kind of unity - or union - being aimed at or worked for is what is in the New Testament, or will have any more intrinsic value than a League of Nations or United (?) Nations, we repeat that it is of no small significance that, as the age closes in, God is compelling a recognition of His own established way. While this may be the imposing of His decree upon the recognition of men, there may be a hidden and deep-down working of His sovereignty to have the genuine thing.

There is another aspect of this matter. It is in the realm of

'World Missions'.

No one with any eyes to see can fail to recognise that we have turned a very big corner in the matter of what have been called 'World Missions'. This turn is truly stated by one very competent to judge. Here are his words (we quote them with certain reservations which we will later mention):

"The missionary movement stands at the beginning of a new age." "Among enlightened individuals, for example, it is now common to hear the term 'world mission of the Church' used instead of the time-honoured phrase 'foreign missions'." "The age of foreign missions has passed." "The challenge of our day

lies rather in a world-wide heathenism running horizontally through all the religions, cultures, and nations of the world, including our own." "Nothing is foreign that concerns our mission to take Christ to our disordered world." "Then, also, we speak less of 'missions' today and more often of the 'world-mission'." "The transition from the plural to the singular is important." "...the word 'missions' in the plural suggests many scattered enterprises, supported by churches and individuals because of their concern for a particular missionary or a specific type of work... in promoting these enterprises we find ourselves exalting the incidental and the subsidiary rather than the basic and the permanent. The missionary faith at home cannot be nurtured on success stories, for in some countries, at least, dark days lie ahead - how dark we dare not even surmise..." "To go a step further, this 'world-mission' is a world-mission of the church. Missionary emphasis today is upon the church. We are concerned with the mission of the church ... The modern 'rediscovery of the church', of which we read and hear so much, was, in fact, largely a missionary achievement... It is with the church as fellowship, rather than organisation, that the missionary movement is concerned... Incorporation into the fellowship is the end of conversion. A solitary believer is an impossibility... Experience on the mission field has demonstrated that the gospel is commended to unbelievers by the corporate witness of the new life as lived within the fellowship as a 'colony of heaven'. The church as fellowship is not only the end of evangelism; it is the agent in that process."

The above is no isolated judgment and appraisal. Our point in this statement is that - whether it be the Church of Divine revelation, or of man's conception - it is the fact of the Church that is finding an altogether new and primary place in the realm of Christian concern. This, we repeat, is very significant, and ought to be considered seriously in the light of Divine sovereignty, as displacing both individualism and institutionalism. There is a particular aspect of this to which our evangelical leaders in particular will do well to take heed. We quote here from another work for the sake of getting to the point quickly.

"All through the Christian age a minority of believers has endeavoured to carry out in corporate life the Scriptural principles (i.e. of Church life and work). The bitterest and most implacable opposition has come to them, not from the world, but from organised Christendom, that is, the system men call the Church. By this powerful organisation they have been in turn oppressed, misrepresented, persecuted, reviled, ridiculed, and ignored, but their persistence from century to century has supplied proof of the practicability of the principles they professed."

The present writer has recently spent some time in the East and the Far East and has seen the glory and the tragedy of the above.

On the one hand a mighty work of God - not on a 'mission' or institutional basis at all, but on the true and pure basis of the Church - is expressing itself and reproducing itself as shown in the book of the 'Acts', reaching far and wide until churches have been born in many hundreds of places (literally true), with large numbers of fulltime workers, and an order beautiful to behold, a joy that bows one to worship. One thanks God for ever having been allowed the honour of seeing just a part of this work, from the inside, and of being able to look deeply into its constitution. This is something actually in existence and still going on today. But on the other hand, this is the work that has had more opposition in misunderstanding, misrepresentation, criticism, and avoidance on the part of organized Christianity, than any other Christian activity. 'Christians' have even gone so far as to boycott in business those who have been associated with this work. It is happening today, but the most evident seal of God is on this testimony.

This leads us to our second main word in this editorial. It has to do with this increasing and blighting

Suspicion Among Christians.

Error, false teaching, and heresy have always been a major means by which the Devil has sought to destroy "the testimony of Jesus", but when he brought in the weapon of what is known as 'Modernism', or 'Higher Criticism', he used a double-barrelled gun. One barrel he aimed directly at the great fundamental truths of the Person of Christ, the work of Christ, and the authority of the Bible. He has thus wrought great havoc, but one wonders whether even that is comparable to the mischief of his second and closely related barrel. By it he has poured out volumes and clouds of suspicion, fear, mistrust, apprehension, and all the grievous effects of these among true Christians. There is not a single person today who is quite safe in this 'Christian' world and atmosphere. Some of the most outstanding and erstwhile evangelical stalwarts have at length fallen under its awful miasma, and died of a broken heart because of it - and all so untrue! The enemy stops short at no point short of dividing the last two Christians, and if he cannot find true ground for doing it by spreading suspicion and mistrust - "evil report" - he will make it by giving a twist to anything that is capable of being twisted. It is like an evil disease, a blight, a cancer, working in the very system of Christianity, and because of it the Church can never be true to the glorious definition:-

*"Fair as the moon,
Clear as the sun,
Terrible as an army with banners."*

God only knows what He is losing by this, and what capital Satan is making out of it! God forbid that there should ever be compromise with false teaching and error, but is not the predisposition to suspicion, the capitulation to a spirit of mistrust, and a mentality which is all on the alert for something doubtful, being carried too far, to the destruction of the Church's authority and unity?

We beg to appeal to all those to whose eyes this message may come, that they will ask the Lord, if need be, to completely convert their mentality in this matter. Would it not be more according to the spirit of the Master, who said "Let him that is without sin cast the first stone", and "He that is not against us is for us", if, as our instant reaction to every 'report', 'rumour', criticism, judgment, insinuation, innuendo, or whisper, we instantly asked the question, Is it true? Did the speaker - or writer - really mean that? Is there not another meaning to be given to it? Is it not - perhaps - an unfortunate way of putting it, but not necessarily pernicious? Should we not, before accepting it, find out whether our interpretation is the right one, or whether we may be mistaken?

Whatever value there may have been, or may be, in the meticulous custodianship of 'soundness' which some have assumed - and we do owe much to those who have been eyes to the Church when there has really been something to see that threatened The Faith - the Lord has suffered, and His people have suffered, far more from the ultra-critical and suspicious and fearful than from many other more open assaults upon the truth. The enemy is engaged more than ever upon a campaign of sabotage within the Church for its internal disintegration, and it is for us to resist him by seeking all the *positive* ground of fellowship possible, not looking for all the negative ground, either really or imaginatively existent.

There are various ways of approaching the matter of Christian unity. We have before approached it in this paper along the line of Scripture, dealing with its spiritual basis. Many books have been

published and articles written by various authors. Nothing seems to have had much effect, but we venture to believe that such a change of disposition as is here appealed for would go a very long way toward rescuing the Church from its present weakness due to its internecine strife and its civil war.

To return to our starting point. Is it not a matter for real spiritual perception and discernment that - at a time like this, at the end of the age - the Church should be so largely crippled by an intensive campaign of the evil forces to spread suspicion and doubt through all its ranks, and by lies, halftruths, and misapprehensions to get the Lord's people all looking at one another with questions and uncertainties, so that they are totally unable to face a common foe, and a great vocation, as one man in Christ?