

How Life Is Maintained - the Principle of the New Covenant

by T. Austin-Sparks

Christianity can only be kept living and fresh through an ever-growing apprehension of Christ and a continuous and ever-growing revelation of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: John 16:9, Romans 1:18, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, 2 Corinthians 4:6, Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 4:15-16, Hebrews 2:10, Hebrews 5:11, Hebrews 6:1, Hebrews 12:5-11

Topics: "New Covenant", "Spiritual Life"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the necessity of maintaining spiritual life within Christianity, warning against reducing it to mere 'dead works' or systems of doctrine. He explains that the New Covenant is not a set of beliefs but a living relationship with Christ, revealed through the Holy Spirit. Sparks highlights the importance of personal revelation of Christ in the believer's heart, which is essential for true Christianity to thrive. He argues that all practices and doctrines should be seen as expressions of the Living Person of Christ, rather than rigid systems. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a continuous, growing understanding of Christ to keep faith vibrant and impactful.

Transcript

In our last chapter we laid special emphasis upon the necessity for everything to be preserved in life, as against even Christianity becoming resolved into another system of "dead works". For, what the writer (of the Epistle to the Hebrews) said was necessary as to Judaism in his time, has now become a necessity in relation to much of Christendom, namely "repentance from dead works" (6:1).

In this chapter we shall gather our thoughts around a principle which is implicit in the whole purpose and argument of the letter. It is that of how life is preserved and maintained. This is one of the most difficult matters to convey unless there is a real measure of spiritual understanding, and it might well suffer in the same way as did the "many things" regarding Melchizedek in chapter 5:11. However, the spiritual situation is such today as to justify every attempt at solving it.

The first phase of the problem is this; seeing that there is a sum of Christian doctrine and practice embodied in the New Testament, and that certain clearly defined beliefs and practices represent the substance or foundation of Christianity: that these are not to be added to or taken from: is it possible that Christianity should not become a set system, tradition, or form? There are some phrases in the New

Testament which would seem to imply that it is such. It would seem impossible to avoid this when once the first newness, novelty, and wonder have passed, and age succeeds age in Christian teaching, work and practice. But to accept such a conclusion and position is really to violate the most vital and crucial facts in New Testament Christianity, and to agree to a state of things which is a caricature and denial or contradiction of Christ. If Christianity were a system of truths and practices then the above-mentioned result would be inevitable. But it is not! It is a living Person, known only in the power of the Holy Spirit. Yes, and not known all at once, but to be known by continuous and ever-growing revelation of the Holy Spirit. That brings us to our point.

The Old And The New Revelation

In the letter under contemplation, among many comparisons and contrasts between what was and what is, reference is made to the two Covenants. Before considering the crucial point of difference between them, let us remind ourselves of the nature and meaning of a Biblical Covenant.

Firstly, a Covenant was an expression, revelation, or making known of God's thoughts, mind, desires, and will. In those presentations of God's mind the character and nature of God was made known. When we read the terms we have to say, That is what God is like.

Then, upon that revelation of Himself God offered and moved to bring His people into an active relationship with Himself as to purpose and destiny. He made a Covenant with them on that basis. It was a mutual understanding that - if they accepted the basis - He fulfilled promises.

The Covenant was sealed or ratified by blood. The blood was provided by God and symbolized life. In a way prescribed by God, man - the other party to the Covenant - had to participate by an act of identification with the blood-donor. So it became a case of sharing in one life. It was this that made blood so sacred in Old Testament times. Of course this opens up the whole realm of Blood Covenant, but here we do no more than hint at it. To violate the terms of this Covenant was to rupture the very bond of life. The focal point of all warning and judgment was idolatry, which was spiritual fornication, or - in principle - unlawful mixture of bloods - i.e. life.

Thus we are able to come to the heart of the Letter to the Hebrews. These Hebrews would understand it well. Look again at the Blood, the Life, and the Covenant in this letter. Here we are able to appreciate the whole question of sonship, with which we dealt in the last chapter. But here we are brought right up to the all-dominating feature of the Person of Christ.

The Living Person Governs All

No, it is not a new system of truth. It is not a new and superior religion. It is a Living Person of Whom the truths and practices are but spiritual features.

Let us look at this briefly in three aspects.

Firstly; the Letter to the Hebrews (and indeed the whole New Testament) does not say that we have to come to believe and accept certain doctrines such as those mentioned in chapter 6 - Repentance, Faith, Baptism, Laying on of hands, Resurrection of the dead, Eternal Judgment - in order to be New Testament Christians. Although the passage seems to contradict that statement, we are very insistent upon it, for it is upon this that we are sure the whole question of life and death rests. It is here also that a very great peril lies in the preaching and propagation of New Testament truth. If these matters have a place, as they

certainly do, that place is subsequent to something else. Does it sound strange - in the light of certain Scriptures - to say that, in the first instance, we are not commissioned to preach repentance? While it may be less surprising to be told that the same is true regarding baptism, etc., yet it is as true of the one as of the other! The Holy Spirit always demands and secures a background of and occasion for precipitating a reaction from man's side, and that ground is not just that men are told that they must do certain things. No, this letter, like all New Testament preaching and teaching, opens with a revelation and presentation of the Person of Christ in living fullness. It was ever and only as people were convicted by the Holy Spirit as to the sovereign supremacy of the Lord Jesus and were actively ready to capitulate utterly to Him that these other things became a living and eager expression of that capitulation. Until people have really seen Christ by Holy Spirit revelation or illumination and conviction, there is no adequate motive for repentance, and the rest. It is not repentance for sins! That would make salvation a matter of degree according to the number or nature of the sins. It is all a matter of the Person. "Of sin, because they believe not on Me" (John 16:9). Hence, New Testament preaching was little more than a proclaiming of Christ - crucified, raised, exalted, glorified - with its implications and challenge. The Holy Spirit's way of overthrowing and uprooting false systems and positions has never been that of exposing the falseness, but that of bringing Christ in His greater fullness into view and convicting concerning Him! It is always positive, never negative. So it is the shadow of a Glorified Man - God's Son - that lies right over all the detail of the letter, and the New Testament as a whole.

Secondly; all the truths and practices are but

Features Of The Living Person

and must be seen in the light of the inclusive revelation of Himself. Take the matters referred to in particular in chapter 6. "Baptism" is not an ordinance, it is Christ expressed in death and resurrection as representing the old creation judged and doomed, and the new creation which is wholly out from God without a trace of judgment ground in it. Baptism then is the way in which a believer declares that he or she has been crucified with Christ, and, although living, yet it is not himself or herself but Christ.

The New Covenant, in the first place, is in the blood of Christ, i.e. His life, and in participation in His nature as "firstborn among many brethren". Glance again at chapter 2 of this letter.

The "Laying on of Hands" in the New Testament signified that Christ is now no isolated and separate Individual, but Head of the Church - His Body - and that the Spirit in anointing upon the Head is for all the members in relatedness to Him and to one another; the Spirit being the power, the wisdom, the capacities, the qualifications, the energies, and the endowments for the Body's functioning as a heavenly Body. Hence, with the Laying on of Hands at the beginning the Spirit demonstrated for all time that Christ and His members are one for the accomplishment of eternal counsels. This is no ordinance, it is Christ corporately expressed.

It is in this way that all doctrine and practice must be seen. Not as things in themselves, but as features of the Living Person, and they must be kept in that relationship.

Thirdly; and here we come to the principle which lies at the heart of all. Nothing that is in the New Testament can be taken and reconstructed into a system just because it is there. There is no system of doctrine and procedure which lies within that vast compass called "Christianity," however divergent or contradictory, however nominal or extreme, however fantastic or doubtful, but bases itself upon Scripture, and supports itself by the New Testament. It is no guarantee that there will be life because a framework, a

body, has been put together and built up according to the exact technique of the New Testament. Many efforts have been made to reconstruct the "New Testament Church" in the belief that the nearer to the model the surer and fuller the Divine commitment. But it just doesn't work! The order of the New Covenant is just the reverse of the Old. Then God wrote upon tablets of stone and presented it as a tangible and objective completeness. In the New, the Spirit of God - dwelling within - writes upon the heart and mind. Then God appeared in unapproachable and unendurable glory so that men were devastated by His presence. Now "God... hath shined into our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (see 2 Cor. 3, 4, and 5).

The face of Jesus Christ.

The glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

The knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

The light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

In our hearts the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Now, the crucial point is this. The principle of the New Covenant is a first-hand individual revelation of Christ as the knowledge of God in terms of glory in the heart of the believer. Every individual believer only comes into true Christianity by a revelation of Christ in his or her heart, so that the knowledge of Christ is all their own, and as real as when God commanded light to shine in darkness. But that is not all. That shining must be progressive. Christ is far too vast to be seen in more than minute degrees at any one time. The bulk of the New Testament is taken up with getting Christians to see what an immense realm it is into which they have come, and how they must go on; and that is the object of the letter under consideration.

Christianity can only be kept living and fresh and full of impact as Christians are living in an ever-growing apprehension of Christ as the Holy Spirit reveals Him in the heart.

This apprehension may only come as necessity is laid upon us by reason of suffering and trial. Capacity will increase by the stretching of suffering (see chapter 12, and read "child-training" for "chastening"). There is no succession in Christianity other than that of the revelation of Christ to the heart by the Holy Spirit. It is not a system to be perpetuated, but a life to be possessed. The value of the Scriptures is that they contain depths and fullnesses which have never yet been fathomed; and when we speak of "revelation" we do not mean anything extra to them, but of that which is in them, but only known by the inward "writing" and "shining" of the Holy Spirit. The great peril into which Christendom has fallen is that of stultifying the vastness of Christ by putting Him into a framework of credal statements, each one of which seeks to be the beginning and end of the matter. Moreover, the Church and its work have been reduced to a formula, and no room is left for anything that goes beyond that formula. It is just possible - and indeed it has sometimes happened - that the Lord should throw such a freshness and fullness of light upon some Scriptural statement of truth as to transform and revolutionize it and lead out into an altogether new life and ministry; and this without any contradiction of its essential and true meaning. There is such a thing as holding down the truth in tradition, as well as holding down the truth in unrighteousness (Rom. 1:18).

Let us try to summarize what we have said and meant.

(1) It is doubtful whether a full and complete system of doctrine and procedure can be reconstructed from the New Testament, so that on all matters we have a precise answer to every question as to what should be done, and how it should be done at any given time. There certainly are basic and fundamental truths, but the Holy Spirit is still needed.

(2) It is, moreover, doubtful whether the Lord meant that there should be such a complete verbal framework; so that everything could be applied, repeated, and duplicated mechanically.

(3) The only living way to the realization of the Divine thought and intention is by an apprehension of spiritual principles. When these principles are grasped, then the object, the means, and the methods of their expression are livingly appreciated.

For instance:

(a) Sonship. When we recognize that sonship is a full Divine thought, and not just an initial one, as in birth, we shall then have the motive for "pressing on to full growth". It is a principle.

(b) Corporate union, life, and service. When we see the corporate principle as governing spiritual fullness, and that it is not possible for any unit of the Body of Christ to come to fullness, apart from relatedness with other members, then we really have apprehended the true nature of the work, way, and end of God, and, amongst other things, we have the most powerful motive for fellowship.

(c) The Holy Spirit's revelation in terms of life. "The law of the Spirit of life" is the principle of all that is of God. A thing can be in the Bible, and we can have read it a thousand times, but until the Holy Spirit makes it life to us it will be unfruitful. Hence, there is a place and need for an inward revelation of the Word of God, and this is the only true succession. Nothing can be preserved alive through generations save as every one entering its realm does so on the basis of such a personal, inward, living, and growing revelation of the truth, so that the origin and beginning is constantly repeated in experience.

These are principles. The Epistle to the Hebrews has been called the Book of the Open Heaven, and this is its meaning.

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