

In the Letters to the Corinthians

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon delves into the Letters to the Corinthians, revealing their profound insights into the nature of Christ and the Christian life amidst a backdrop of disorder.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 2:9

Topics: "Spiritual Maturity", "The Nature of Christianity"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks explores the Letters to the Corinthians, emphasizing their rich context and the multifaceted presentation of Christ within them. He highlights the contrast between the disorder in Corinth and the profound truths revealed through these letters, questioning why God allowed such imperfections to be documented. Sparks argues that the struggles faced by the Corinthian church serve to draw out significant spiritual values and insights about the nature of Christianity. He stresses the importance of distinguishing between the natural and spiritual man, asserting that true maturity in Christ requires a deep understanding of the Spirit's work. Ultimately, he calls for a recognition of Christ as the transformative figure who leads believers from the old creation to the new.

Transcript

We have, in these messages, been seeing that each part (book) of the New Testament has a particular aspect of Christ to present for the Church in this dispensation. The writer in his apprehension of Christ has this burden and urge, and when we have read all the writings we have a very comprehensive presentation of our Lord. There is, however, another feature which is so very rich and helpful. It is that these separate documents are what they are in value because of their immediate practical context. It is the situations to which they are addressed which bring out the many-sided fullness of the mission, meaning and message of Christ. History, both temporal and spiritual, makes the Christ so necessary, but also so appropriate. This is so very clear when we see the background and occasion of these writings. The Letters to the Corinthians - or the Church in Corinth - are particularly rich in the drawing out of Christ, as I trust we shall see. Oh, for a pen dipped in the fountain of Divine inspiration to show even something of what is embodied of Christ in these Letters! One's heart fails before such an undertaking.

When "Corinth" or "Corinthians" are mentioned, the reaction is immediately that of a frown. The disorders, the wrongs, the sins, and all that is reprehensible at once take the foreground of the mind. Truly it is a terrible and distressing state of things, and it may be excusable if a major question is asked as to whether that IS Christianity. There is no passing over of it lightly and this element, of contrast and contradiction is

not to be excused. The strongest things are said about it by the writer of the Letters. Face it! Take it all for what it is! Hide nothing! Having done so ask your major question: Why did God ever allow all this, and why did He allow it to be put into a document which would go out to ever-widening circles through an ever-increasing length of time? Why did not God cover this shame, this reproach, this contradiction to His own nature and will? When you have done all that, and asked that ultimate question, you have really only given the answer. God has NEVER done that, either in the history of His greatest servants, nor in that of His chosen people. Over this strange way of God, a way that we think we would never take, we have to ask a very significant question: Would there be gain or loss from the standpoint of all future time if all this delinquency and wrong had been covered over and not have been allowed to be known to posterity? There are different ways of putting that question, but, have we, and the Church through the centuries, gained from the Letters to the Corinthians, seeing what it was that necessitated these Letters? There are two main things that have to come out of the answer to that basic question. Firstly, the values that have accrued, which have been DRAWN out by the situation being dealt with. Secondly, why was it that such a situation could exist among Christians?

These two matters are going to take us a long way, and into deep and very profitable waters or mines.

Let us, then, begin by gathering together some of what we may call

THE SPOIL OF BATTLE

That there was a battle, and a very hot one for God's testimony in Corinth, does not need arguing. Putting aside, for the moment, the tragedy and shame of the situation there, what of the values drawn out by it?

We have been accustomed to speaking of the Letters to the Ephesians and Colossians, with Philippians sandwiched between, as the high-water mark of New Testament revelation. In their own realm that may be true. That is, as a revelation of the eternal counsels of God relating to the Church, as such, it IS true. But in the realm of Christianity and the meaning of the true Christian calling and life, is there anything comparable in the New Testament with some of the parts of the first Letter to the Corinthians? Take, for instance, that brief section in chapter 2, verses 9-10:

"Things which eye saw not, and ear heard not, And which entered not into the heart of man, Whatsoever things God prepared for them that love him. But unto us God revealed them through the Spirit: for the Spirit searcheth all things, yea the deep things of God."

What of the statements in chapter 6, verses 2 and 3, statements which most commentators and exegetes pass over because they cannot explain them:

"Know ye not that the saints shall judge the world?"

"Know ye not that we shall judge angels?"

What a startling way of awakening us to the calling in Christ! What shall we say of chapter 13? Is there anything in all literature to compare with that? Read it in the various versions, such as Moffat's, the Amplified, etc. This is indeed a superlative standard for attainment. No wonder Paul himself elsewhere - and later - wrote: "Brethren, I count not myself to have attained."

But pass on to chapter 15, this utterly breath-taking presentation of what the Apostle called: "The gospel which we preached". When we read on to the description of the different categories of the resurrection

bodies of the saints - sun, moon, stars, glories; the change and transformation from corruption to incorruption, and all the other details - we are left standing, gasping, with one immense question: 'How did Paul come to know all this?' The only possible answer only increases the wonder of the revelation itself. It must be all of a piece with his statement about the Lord's Table in chapter 10 verse 23: "For I received of the Lord that which I also delivered unto you...". Being in the past tense - "I delivered unto you" must link this on to the second Letter, chapter 12: "I knew a man in Christ FOURTEEN YEARS AGO... caught up into Paradise and heard unspeakable things...". Chapter 15 of the first Letter must be just the fringe of the "unspeakable things".

Have I established my statement and argument that the sad and deplorable situation at Corinth was sovereignly in grace made the very occasion of drawing out some of the most sublime things in Divine revelation? Thank God for sovereign grace!

Now we must get nearer to the particular purpose of these messages, namely, what Christ means in this situation.

To reach this we have to note some major features. The Letters to the Corinthians are full of vivid contrasts. Over against each other there is the contrast between:

The old creation and the new;

The natural and the spiritual;

Darkness and light;

The earthly and the heavenly;

The temporal and the eternal;

The Old Testament and the New; etc.

In between these contrasts stands Jesus Christ with what He means to each. His back is toward the first set with the mighty "No!" of His Cross. His face is toward the second category with the mighty "Yes!" of His resurrection.

In this way Christianity is shown to be severed and rent in two.

CHRISTIANITY SPLIT IN TWO

There is here revealed a CHRISTIANITY to which Christ (in His mission, meaning and message) says positively "NO!" Over that Christianity is written a large "CANNOT".

This is taken up for emphasis and pronouncement early in the first Letter, and runs on through the many matters which are standing for judgment and correction. Only space forbids us tabulating these points of Divine veto. Let the reader read the Letters and note the points at which Christ says in effect: "Not so!" In that way - in the end - the inclusive and comprehensive verdict is: 'You will never get through to God's end in that way!' To help in seeing this we can note where the Corinthians are placed in spiritual history and geography. Pick out the allusions to the Old Testament in these Letters. Two things rise up in bold relief. One, the old creation with its darkness, chaos, disorder, 'voidness', and features of judgment. Two, Israel in the wilderness. We will take this second for our present purpose. Quite clearly, Letter one and chapter

10 puts the Corinthians (and a certain kind of Christianity) in the position of Israel between Egypt and the Land of Promise, and it does so with a very strong warning. The same position is postulated in Letter two, chapter 3, at verse 7 to verse 16.

What, then, were the features of that position in Israel's history?

1. They were out of Egypt, the realm of judgment by SOVEREIGN grace, and baptized "in the cloud and sea" POSITIONALLY.
2. They were IN THE WAY of the "heavenly calling", and God's purpose.
3. They had the TOKENS of the supernatural life and position, e.g. the Manna, and Water, etc: the "mystery of Christ", "and that Rock was Christ." They knew the sovereign virtue of the blood of the Lamb. Many were the evidences that God was with them and for them. But with all that there hung over them continually the threat and peril of missing the INHERITANCE, which - alas - that generation did do. This is THE warning to this certain kind of Christianity in Corinthians. Why was that? What does "Corinthians" say to that position? Probably the answer is found in two particulars; one, it is possible to be out of the world POSITIONAL and for the world to still be IN you. Egypt, even after all its judgment, still continued to pull back and maintain its hold. It was never a very difficult thing to hark back to Egypt. From the Corinthian Letters it is easy to see that the world had its pull, its influence, its attraction, over the SOUL of these Christians. The writer was very sure that this could be disastrous regarding the inheritance in the case of those whose STANDING did not lead to their heavenly STATE. In this connection it is that he so strongly discriminates between

THE NATURAL MAN AND THE SPIRITUAL MAN

Literally this is the man of soul, and the man of spirit. His summing up of this difference is that the man of soul cannot and does not go through. He does not come to maturity, but, even after years, he is still a "babe" (3:1-2). It is "he that is spiritual" who can, and does, go through! Paul strongly emphasizes the veto that rests upon the one when he says that "the natural [soulical] man cannot".

Christianity has been very slow to even recognize, to say nothing of accepting, this great divide. For want of this discrimination (resulting from a deep ploughing and cleaving work of the Cross) a Christianity exists which is NOT GOING THROUGH TO WHAT GOD INTENDS, and multitudes of Christians are aware of it!

The universities and colleges may make doctors of medicine, philosophy, art, etc., but be quite sure, a man of the Spirit with the knowledge of "the things which have not entered into the heart of man" can no man nor university make! This is the argument and verdict of the New Testament.

The inclusive point, then, is that CHRIST IS OTHER. He is the other Man, the Man of the Spirit. His knowledge, wisdom, ability, are of another order. The REAL effect of the indwelling and MASTERY of the Holy Spirit is to SHOW and make Christianity a reproduction, a representation of Christ; the mission, meaning, and message of Christ is to produce that essentially other kind that He is (see 2 Corinthians 3:16-18).

But read the two Letters again!

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