

Knowledge of Christ After the Spirit

by T. Austin-Sparks

Christians must strive for a balanced life, governed by the Spirit of Christ, to be a true expression of Him and to fulfill their purpose.

Scripture: John 15:19, John 17:12, Romans 12:2, 1 Corinthians 5:9-10, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 6:15, Ephesians 4:15-16, Philippians 2:5, Colossians 3:10, 1 John 4:17

Topics: "Living in the World", "Christ's Uniqueness"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the uniqueness of Christ as the Son of Man, who embodies the divine intention for a new creation, perfectly balancing his kinship with humanity while remaining distinct from it. He challenges believers to live in the world without being of it, advocating for a life that reflects Christ's understanding, sympathy, and balance in interactions with others. Sparks highlights the importance of being conformed to Christ's image, which requires a reconstitution of our lives through the Holy Spirit, leading to a harmonious existence that embodies both truth and love. He warns against the dangers of alienating others through a misguided sense of holiness and calls for a church that reflects Christ's character and balance. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a deeper understanding of Christ's headship and the transformative power of the Spirit in creating a new community that expresses the essence of Christ.

Transcript

I am continuing for a little while our previous meditation. We were thinking of the uniqueness of the Son of Man, and seeking to see how Christ is the Divine meaning to and of a new race, a new creation; how in the new creation it is God's intention and undertaking to reconstitute everything according to Christ. We were especially emphasising the fact that He stands alone; there is not another, there never has been another, Son of Man in His particular sense, and that in itself indicates what God is doing. There has come out from heaven, from God, one Who is different from all others, and in the very difference itself there is implied the mind and the intention of God, inasmuch as that One has been so vitally related to the race. We were seeing how that, on the one hand, there was such a feeling that He was one with all shades, aspects and phases of the race, He fitted in - with men, women, and children: with rich and poor: with learned and unlearned. There was never a strain, an embarrassment, a sense that He was an outsider, in any one instance. He fitted in with different nationalities. On the other hand, while everybody felt His kinship with them, they also felt just as strongly how outside He was, how different. That is unique. To be so utterly other and outside and different, and not of this race in a very real sense, and yet to fit in without any friction or strain, where things are open and unforced, that is not natural. The only strain that ever

arose was in the realm of prejudice and bigotry and determination not to have Him, or of willful sin, deliberate unbelief, the closed heart. Given the ordinary life, however varied, there was a marvellous kinship, sympathy, understanding, fellowship - and yet He was One from the outside, and One still of the outside. To reconcile those two things is the miracle of the incarnation, it is the mystery of Christ - and that is my next point.

In the World, but not of the World

If we are going to be conformed to His image, reconstituted inwardly on the basis of Christ, as we are to be, we are going to find this is the most difficult thing, and yet the thing that has to be. Paul in one place touches on this very thing about people becoming so exclusive in their Christianity on the matter of externals, and he says, Well, if we are going to follow that line, we might as well go right out of the world altogether, we cannot stay here (1 Cor. 5:9-10). How can we be in the world and not of it, and yet possess an abiding sympathy so that we do not unnecessarily alienate people, and do not put ourselves in some exclusive position, all the time frowning on people and things and making them feel that we think ourselves different and better by what we do and the way we proceed? How difficult it is to contemplate this - to be here, to touch human life at all points in all its phases and aspects, and to touch it with sympathy and understanding and kindness and solicitude, and not always the spirit of condemnation and detachment; and yet at the same time to register the fact unconsciously - oh, God grant that it may be unconsciously! - that we are different, we are not of it. I believe that a very great deal of harm has been done by Christians getting a wrong conception of their heavenliness. They have taken their heavenliness in a wrong way. If you walk in close touch with Christ, the heavenliness will register itself, you need not worry about it. People have been alienated, and even made antagonistic, by Christians who are all the time frowning on them, giving the impression that they are all wrong. I look again at the Master's life on earth with this thought in mind. He comes into a situation which is wrong; He does not condone it, nor smile upon it, nor accept it, His whole nature is right outside of it; and yet His touch with the persons involved is one that does not necessarily alienate them, nor drive them away, nor provoke them, irritate them, stir them to antagonism. He comes into the situation and the effect is either that they yield to His influence and He is able to lift them out of the wrong, or they revolt positively and turn away. I could cite instances. I am asking you to look at the life of the Master with this spiritual thought in view.

Consider the woman taken in sin. Do you think He accepted that, or was sympathetic to it, or could condone it? Do you not think that there was a revulsion in Him against the thing? He could not have any fellowship with it. He might well have come to this woman with a frown and caused her to cringe, to shrink, to break out in despair. He is outside of it, you know what His nature is, but oh! He is able to come near and touch her in such a way that she is not alienated nor driven off, she is lifted and helped. Now that is a simple incident, but I say it is a most difficult thing to do in a world like this, and only Christ in us can enable us to do it; but it is something we have to look at.

What is the object of Christian teaching? It is to present us with things like this and make us face them in prayer. The teaching cannot do it, but we can take it to the Lord. We can say, Lord, here I am in this world and I have to touch things against which my soul revolts, all that is of Thee in me hates it, and I could very easily make these people feel what I feel about it, and in so doing, I could drive them away from Thee. But they have to be won, they have to feel a lift by my presence rather than a crushing. Oh, solve that problem! Really, a life in true harmony with the Lord Jesus will be like that. "As he is, even so are we in this world" (1 John 4:17). Can you meet people of this world, whose life, manner, course and system simply revolt your soul, and make them feel something better by your presence - that you are not of their

way and they know it - and yet not alienate them from the Lord? I say it is one of the difficult things for us here. But I am quite sure that that is the meaning of knowing Christ not after the flesh but after the Spirit. That is one of the meanings of the new creation. We have known so many well-meaning Christians who have simply gone through the world making enemies, alienating people, making them hate Christianity. That is not Christ.

Now, the difficulty is how to do that while standing clear - without yielding, without compromise; but there is a grace of God that can do it. The Lord Jesus did it, and if there is any meaning at all in our having the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of Jesus, the meaning is practical - we can do it too. His closeness of touch, sympathy, understanding, forbearance, gentleness, longsuffering, mercifulness, and yet His complete "otherness" of nature - that is Christ after the Spirit.

A Perfectly Balanced Life

Then I want you to note another thing about Him which has so much to do with this inward adjustment of a Spirit-governed life - it has to do with the wonderful balance in the life of the Lord. How poised He was, how balanced! Take the matter of mind, heart and will, and you find in His case those three were perfectly balanced. We are very different naturally. I suppose people as a whole can be divided up into three classes - firstly, those who are more in the realm of their head than anywhere else. They are all head in one way or another. If they are not intellectual, they are of another kind of mentality - introspective, analysing, going round things in the mind, all thinking, all puzzling, all reasoning, all working in that realm: that is the chief characteristic. You can see it almost in their faces. It is this trying to get through with the head that more or less characterises people of a certain class. Then you have another class - all heart, all feeling, all emotion. They simply live in their feelings - perhaps different forms, but still feelings. They are governed by their feelings, and just how things affect them in the realm of their emotional life. They are either up or they are down - you can never be sure, but you do know that, whether they are up or down, it is their feelings that are ruling. If only they would think a little more and not move so much on impulse, they would be more balanced. The third class - people governed by will, people of a drive, forceful, assertive. The will is unreasoning sometimes. They do not stop to think. They get a drive on, but do not think of the damage they are doing to themselves or other people. Their will overrides feeling - very good sometimes to do that, but to be all will, all of that kind of strength, determination, grip and force, oh, it is overbearing, and does a lot of harm.

People are more or less divided into those classes naturally, but you cannot find anything like that with the Lord Jesus on earth. You can find will coming in at times very strongly, and sometimes heart and sometimes mind. Yes, mind could come in, and who could stand up against Him in that realm? Some of His answers silenced, paralysed, those who were cleverest. Look at some of the answers He gives, some of the ways He deals with a problem. They think they have Him this time, there is no way out. A simple statement, and the whole thing collapses; they have not got Him at all! But the point is this - while these things are there, they are balanced; there is never strength of will to the hurt of sensibility; there is never strength of emotion to the damage of rightful severity. He does not allow His heart to run away with His sense of judgment. He is perfectly balanced; and that is one of our needs. But that is why the Holy Spirit has come, and this is one of the things that has to take place in a Holy Spirit ruled life. It has to become a balanced life, to be saved from being lopsided. Anything over-weighted makes going very uneven. Draw a figure of a circle, and divide it into three segments - "mind", "heart", "will." Then get a bump on "will" a little bigger than heart or mind, and make your circle into a wheel, and see how evenly you go along! - the unevenness of an unbalanced life. It makes going difficult, hard and uncomfortable.

Take the even poise of our Lord's walk here on earth. Now, what we all need is that the Spirit of Christ should come in and bring about an adjustment to Him, reconstitute us so that we go along more evenly - not one day on the heights, the next day in the depths, variable, changeable, because our soul-life is so unbalanced. We have a long way to go in this, but conformity to His image means that, amongst many other things - the bringing of a poise into life, and saving us from these terrible effects of straining, of living in one realm of our souls more than another. We do need that. We sometimes sing "And let our ordered lives confess the beauty of Thy peace." I tell you, I covet that - that ordered life inwardly.

But then not only were the three things in Him balanced as three things, there was a perfect balance in each one of them. There was the perfect balance of His mind, the balance of His will, the balance of His heart, in this way - you can have a mind that is a very righteous mind, and be a person who is very just and right and proper, very accurate, very alive to anything that is a little doubtful. These very righteous people are exceedingly trying to get on with, and they make for great difficulty. You may be a very righteous person in your standards, and require to have things perfectly right - well, that is good in a way, but supposing your righteousness of mind is destroying tenderness and sympathy of judgment? I think George Eliot went to the other extreme, but there is a lot in what she said "To understand all is to forgive all." If only we really did know more than we know, our judgments would be less severe. We should see the necessity for reconsidering our verdicts, and be a great deal more sympathetic in our attitude of righteousness. The Lord was like that. You could not have anybody whose standard of righteousness was higher than His, or as high. His standard was an inflexible standard of righteousness: you can trace that in the Gospels; and yet His righteousness was never destructive of, or injurious to, His understanding, His sympathy, His kindness. A thing may be wrong, but there are two ways of bringing home the wrong and standing for the right. One is the destructive, the hurtful; the other, while it is not a variation by a hairsbreadth from the right course, is nevertheless full of understanding and sympathy and insight. With us, it may only amount to believing that there is an explanation that we do not see, a reason that is not apparent to us, another side to the story. (There are almost always two sides to a story. You very, very rarely come upon a matter that has not got two sides to it.) The Lord Jesus lived there, He had His standard, but it was not injurious to kindness and sympathy. We need that Spirit of Christ, we need that reconstituting.

I am not going to follow this in detail into each realm. You can see that His strength of will never rode rough-shod over human susceptibilities or did damage to men's hearts. His strength of will only blazed out in full force when there was the most obvious and manifest involving of the highest principles, when He had really to withstand the thing which was a positive affront to God. Then He will have a whip and knotted cords, and you meet something that does not compromise. But at other times, you can feel the strength of His will, but you can feel that strength coming through in understanding. I venture to say that His relationship with those disciples would not have lasted three days but for this. Look at the story, and see how He bore and forbore, and went right through to the end, and did not alienate one (save that one who was already alienated from the beginning, who never really was one with Him) but He kept those whom the Father had given Him. "Those that thou gavest me I have kept, and none of them is lost, but the son of perdition" (John 17:12). But what a triumph of a balanced life! It is what in the later New Testament is called self-control, sometimes called temperance. It is a poor translation into our English; but it means that, He was able to preserve others in the way because of this.

The Need for Subjection to Christ's Headship

I want to pass on to the larger application of this. This is why the Word of God so often emphasises that everything in the Church must be according to Christ. He personally is the new Man; the Church His Body is the one new man. Now here in the Church, the Holy Spirit wants to constitute corporately according to Christ, and if the old man comes into the Church with his state of unbalance, and some people or individuals in the Church move along one line, and others along another line, of natural life - mind, heart or will, any particular old creation line - they destroy the Church, that is, they nullify its very conception.

In the Church all is to speak of Christ, and therefore in the Church what Christ is has steadily to grow and take ascendancy over all else: and that is why there must be in the Church utter subjection to Christ's Headship. We have such mental pictures about words like that - Christ, the Head of the Body. Do you not see that the Headship of Christ is a spiritual thing? Of course, we are perhaps not thinking that it is a physical thing, but somehow we do get an idea that it is an official thing.

It is not physical and it is not official; it is spiritual. That means that Headship is in virtue of certain spiritual properties, a spiritual nature; and when we talk about becoming subject to Christ, and coming under the Headship of Christ, we are only speaking figuratively of being subjected to what Christ is - that He really does come on like the head and stands over, and everything is adjusted to Him and takes its nature from Him; just as our bodies take their direction from our heads, if we are normal people.

Just as we live from our heads, and our character and nature and actions and speech are all controlled by the head, so the nature of the Church is taken from the nature of Christ; and what the Lord is seeking to get is a Church which does express what Christ is - this balance. Yes, His strength, but also His love; His truth and light, yes, but equally His life. Oh, we can have such a preponderance of light and truth - all head - and little heart. I have known, on the other hand, companies where all is heart, the people falling on one another's necks, with effusive terms of so-called love, and yet they are not growing, not coming to a place of responsibility.

It sounds and looks like love, but underneath there is something lacking. They need instruction, they need edifying. When the Body is fitly framed and compacted, balanced, brought into proper articulation and harmony, taking its nature and its character from Christ and therefore governed by what He is as the new creation Man, then you are getting what God is after; and you can have that in a local company and in local companies, which thereby become, not places that stand for some extraordinary truth, something different from all other teachings, and all the time trying to get hold of something that is extraordinary and remote from common recognition - no, you simply get there an embodiment and an expression of Christ, and that is all that God wants, and all we ought to want.

People meeting us as companies as well as individuals will be meeting something that touches them. They will say, If only there were more of this, the world would be a different place, and yet this is something so outside the realm of human possibility that only God could do this; this is God! It requires Almighty God, and yet here it is, it touches us, we see that this is what is needed! Oh, the tragedy in this connexion in these days! You hear it on the wireless almost any day; you find the literature of our day just crowded with it - the recognition of the fact that if only things were on the line of Christ, if only Christ's teaching were put into practice, if only Christ, and what He was, really were here and expressed, how different the world would be!

There is plenty of recognition and acknowledgment of that; but on the other side, men at once begin to say, Well, let us get busy on this, we will do this and that to bring it about. They do not recognise that this

is a miracle from heaven, and that it has to come in by a birth, a reconstituting, a new creation fiat. That is where the gap is, and the tragedy, and men fall between the two. But we know better; there He is, and there His Spirit is to do it. It seems to take a long time.

A little bit of conformity to His image seems to occupy almost a lifetime. But nevertheless He is doing something, it does make a difference to have Christ; there are many changes because Christ has come in - we do know that. There are going to be greater changes yet. After all, whatever we may say about the poverty of things in the Church, the world would be a poor place if the people of God were taken out of it; and it will be, when they have gone. There is something here that is not of the world, and the world needs it.

The Lord help us to see Christ and get continually to Him for this conformity to His image, this taking of the Spirit of Christ, this inward reconstituting after the Son of Man, a new creation in Christ Jesus.

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