

The Bride

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the profound significance of the Church as the Bride of Christ, emphasizing its role, calling, and the divine purpose behind this relationship.

Scripture: Isaiah 53:7, Ephesians 5:23, 2 Timothy 2:12, Revelation 19:7, Revelation 21:2, Revelation 22:17

Topics: "Church Unity", "Spiritual Maturity"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks delves into the deep symbolism of the bride of Christ in the book of Revelation, emphasizing the importance of understanding the spiritual meaning behind the bride as the fullest expression of God's love for His Son. He highlights the three main ministries in the New Testament: initiation, building, and measuring up, each marked by the sovereignty of the Lord. The sermon focuses on the bride's characteristics, calling the entire church to embody bridal conditions of meekness, transparency, and devotion to the Lord, with a reminder that suffering and yielding are key aspects of reigning with Christ.

Transcript

"And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev. 21:2).

"Let us rejoice and be exceeding glad, and let us give the glory unto him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And it was given unto her that she should array herself in fine linen, bright and pure: for the fine linen is the righteous acts of the saints. And he saith unto me, Write, Blessed are they that are bidden to the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:7-9).

"The Spirit and the bride say, Come" (Rev. 22:17).

"Christ also is the head of the church, being himself the saviour of the body... the church is subject to Christ... Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for it; that he might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish... we are members of his body. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is great: but I speak in regard of Christ and of the church" (Eph. 5:23, 25-27, 30-32).

It would be good for us, as we approach this subject, to do a little forgetting: to forget, for the time being, any theories that we may have heard or accepted under the designation of the bride of Christ. There are crystallized theories on this matter. There are those who believe the bride is Israel. There are others who believe that the church is not the bride and the bride is not the church -- they are two distinct and different entities, and so on. Will you kindly order them out for the time being -- not in order to accept a new theory, but in order to be open for anything that the Lord may have to say at this time. Please give the Lord the benefit of an open heart and mind.

It would also be good for us to try to get away from the symbolism of this book of the Revelation, a very difficult thing to do, because it is a book that is just full of symbols and symbolisms. But let us try to forget the symbols -- even the symbol of the bride, in that actual word -- and let us seek earnestly to get to the meaning. It is easy to be so occupied with the symbol that we miss the meaning.

Three Main Ministries in the New Testament

To begin with, let me remind you that in the New Testament there are three main phases, or ministries.

There is the phase of what we may call INITIATION; that is, the gathering of the material for the House of God. That is a very prominent phase in the book of the Acts -- the reaching out to, and laying hold of, those who are to compose and constitute the church.

Then there is the second phase or ministry of the BUILDING of that material: the building up, to use Paul's phrase, of the Body of Christ; and that is wrapped up with Paul's letters -- the teaching ministry which follows the gathering. The building up proceeds after the material has been secured and as it is being brought in.

But then there is a third phase, a third ministry. It is that which comes in with the last parts of the New Testament, and mainly through the ministry of John -- though not altogether, for Jude was engaged in this, and James to some extent; but mainly in John's letters, and pre-eminently in the book of the Revelation -- the ministry of MEASURING UP, measuring up to all that has been given; a RECALL ministry, where there has been loss, falling away, departure, declension; and a ministry of JUDGMENT -- judgment not in the sense of passing judgment only, but judgment in the sense of making clear where things have gone wrong, and warning concerning the delinquent state.

These, then, are the three phases of the ministry of the New Testament, and there is the sovereignty of the Lord marking each one of them.

The Sovereignty of the Lord in Relation to the Ministries

We saw previously the sovereign activities of the Spirit of Jesus in laying hold of, apprehending, the material for the House of God. We saw a wonderful combination of heavenly, angelic forces, and the Holy Spirit, in sovereign activities to secure the material of which the church is made. There is no mistaking the sovereignty at work in that phase of the New Testament.

There is likewise a sovereignty observable and very patent in connection with the second part -- that is, the securing, raising up, equipping, endowing of those who are to fulfil the ministry of building up the Body of Christ -- personal gifts of the ascended Lord in sovereign action, qualification by the Holy Spirit unto the many-sided ministry by which the church should be brought to full growth.

But the sovereignty is very much in evidence, too, in the third phase. It is evident in the statements at the beginning of the book of the Revelation. "I John,... was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (1:9). And what happened? He says that things that were given to Jesus by the Father, "the revelation of Jesus Christ which God gave him", were sent, were brought by an angel, by a special messenger, and "signified... unto his servant John" (1:1). If that is not sovereign action, what is? That is Heaven moving, and it is related to this ministry of measuring up, recall, judgment.

Note, moreover, that it was measuring up to the full revelation that God had given. These messages were addressed in the first place to the seven churches in Asia, and it was to the churches in Asia that the fullest revelation through the apostle Paul was given. Ephesus, Laodicea, and the rest, were the churches which were brought into being through this very apostle, who was so sovereignly raised up and equipped for the fullest unveiling of eternal counsels that we have in the Bible. It was concerning that fullness of unveiled divine thought that the book of the Revelation was brought in, sovereignly to recall to that, to judge concerning that; to deal with the Lord's people in the light, not of some partial truth, but of the whole revelation of God's mind.

My point is that it was sovereignly done; and God, who is sovereign, does determine the ministry that is to be fulfilled and by whom it is to be fulfilled, and there is a place in the sovereign purposes and activities of God for a ministry that is a recall ministry. This is a ministry of measuring up, and that particularly characterizes the end times, as is clearly seen here.

The Bride Expresses the Fullest Thought of God Concerning His Son

Now, as we said in our previous meditation, there are seen, in the book of the Revelation, distinctive and particular companies who represent something very much more of the Lord than the rest, and of those various companies, or those various titles which we mentioned -- overcomers, the hundred and forty-four thousand, first-fruits, man child, and so on -- of all these titles, it seems to me that the one that gets nearest to the heart of God is that which is called "the bride". The bride undoubtedly, from every description and presentation and implication, embodies and expresses the fullest thought of the Father concerning the Son. We could gather a very great deal into that -- Old Testament type and figure -- as to the Father's concern for His Son's bride. You will recall, for instance, the story of Abraham, Isaac and Rebekah. But we cannot stay for details. We just make the statement, which you can verify, that, out of all the titles mentioned, it is the bride who embodies and expresses the fullest thought of the Father for the Son.

That which is signified by the bride is, indeed, the first and the governing idea of the entire Trinity -- the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The Father, for the Son, is governed by this thought supremely -- to provide His Son with a bride. What was true in the first creation, humanly, literally, is transcendentally true in the new creation, the Heavenly Man. God says that it is not good for Him to be alone. To provide Him with a bride is the Father's greatest interest in the Son.

The concern of the Son for His bride, the church, is self-evident; we shall see more concerning that presently.

As to the Holy Spirit, that is His very work in this dispensation. We were speaking earlier of this being the dispensation of the Holy Spirit. He has come to secure that bride for the Son, and is pursuing that

purpose, and in this sevenfold reiteration, "what the Spirit saith to the churches", you have implicit His concern to get the church on bridal terms with the Son. The active operations in the book of the Revelation begin with that sevenfold word: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches." It is reiterated seven times -- "what the Spirit saith". And the last thing in the book is: "The Spirit and the bride say, Come." Everything between, so far as the people of God are concerned, is the Spirit's mighty working to secure this bride for the Son. In that last word, which we shall consider later, is found the great joy of the Spirit at the end. "All is ready for you! The work is done; the object is secured. Come!"

Christ's Love, and Giving of Himself, For the Church

This object is found in a specific way in the cross of the Lord Jesus. The cross of the Lord Jesus is a very comprehensive thing and has many sides in its value and function. It has to do with sin, sin's judgment, sin's remission. It has to do with death and death's annihilation for the church. It has to do with Satan, the prince of the world, and his casting out. It has to do with redemption, atonement, justification, and all sides of salvation. They are all in the cross. Then the apostle put his finger upon a specific meaning of the cross when he said: "Christ loved the church and gave himself for it." When Christ went to the cross, while all these other things were being effected and were included, this central thing was being secured. He gave Himself for the church.

This throws us back to some of His own parables. We recall the parable of the treasure in the field, when the whole field was purchased to secure that treasure. Or we think of the parable of the pearl of great price, and the merchant who makes everything that he has subservient to securing that pearl. I once went through the narrow streets of Basrah, on the Persian Gulf, looking into the shops of the pearl merchants, and I saw there, behind glass and bars, some wonderful, marvellous pearls. I was fascinated with them. And from those narrow streets you could look away to the sea, and see the pearl fishers at work in their frail vessels -- perilous work, costly work. Then a pearl merchant from Basrah came and travelled with me the rest of the journey to India. He was a solemn man, and you should have seen how he watched over and guarded his box containing the pearls. It was a reinforced box, with two heavy padlocks, and it was never out of his sight -- never even out of his hands. He arrived at the other end, and the customs wanted to have a look -- but oh, the concern of this man, all the time watching, alert, to see if anybody else was looking. A pearl represented his very life, his subsistence. All his being was concentrated into the pearl -- it was everything to him.

And as I saw it and noted it, how I was taken back to this parable. That is what the Lord knew. We shall come back to that presently. A "pearl of great price": this is a figure of His church, this is a figure of His bride -- the church in the terms of a bride. "Great price": He gave Himself; the cross and all that that cross meant was centred in the pearl, was centred in the bride. "Christ... loved the church, and gave himself up for it."

Again, we said that this is the primary interest of the Holy Spirit; that, in this dispensation, this is the one thing that the Holy Spirit is after. By every method, by every means, along every line, through every ministry, the end that He has in view is the securing of this bride. Would that all the Lord's servants would keep that always before them -- that the end is not just to get individuals saved, important as that is; the end is not just to have so many Christians in the world, important as that is. The end is a corporate vessel called "the bride". The Holy Spirit is dominated by that, He is governed by that in all His activities.

We said, too, that the bride is the consummate, the ultimate, full embodiment of the eternal counsels and purposes of God concerning His Son. This reaches right back to the past eternity into those counsels of the Godhead. God determined everything concerning His Son, in His Son, for His Son: everything was for the Son; and at the heart of everything is the bride, the church, His chosen bride, the elect.

The Lord's Quest for Bridal Characteristics

We come now to this second phase. All the judgments and dealings of the Lord with His people are governed by this object. This is the object of the Lord's dealings with us -- with the church, with the churches, with individuals -- and we must view these messages to the churches in the book of the Revelation in the light of the bride. What is it that this Lord, the Bridegroom, this Son of man, is seeking? What is it that He has in His mind in these messages to the churches? He is after bridal characteristics. So He sits and summarises. There are many things which He commends. These are features of the bride. "I know thy works" -- all right, quite good; "thy labours" -- all right; "thy patience", yes, very good; "thy conscientiousness" -- "thou didst try them that call themselves apostles, and they are not" -- "you have a sense of right and wrong, conscientiousness" -- yes, very good, the bride must certainly be like that; "you are honest, you will not tolerate false apostles and false teachers" -- yes, very good, the bride will certainly be like that; "thou holdest fast my name" -- that is all right, that is good; thou "didst not deny my faith" -- yes, it must be like that, people who comprise this company must certainly be like that. Thy charity, thy service, thy faith, and still more works, more than at the beginning -- all right, all good.

Yes, these are features of the bride, but there is a longer list of things that the bride must not express -- features which are not bridal features and which must go. Lost first love -- that will not do; the bride must be characterized at the end by that which was at the beginning, by an utterness and freshness of devotion to the Lord Himself. "Thou hast there the doctrine of Balaam, and those that teach the doctrine of the Nicolaitans." We may not understand what that was altogether. I do not pretend to be able to tell you, but I think I can tell you exactly what it MEANS. In both these cases, the doctrine of Balaam and of the Nicolaitans, it was a teaching which had come in, purporting to be something superior to the Scriptures, to what God had said. What had God said to Israel, and what had God made Balaam say about Israel? But then, for the gain of unrighteousness, Balaam went right back on his words and brought in a teaching to Israel which in effect said, "Look here, you can do this, you are allowed to do that: God will not take any notice of it, God will not bring you into judgment for that." And the other teaching had the same effect -- a life and a practice which had the Word of God against it, being excused on some theory introduced.

This is not strange to our own day. There are many people who are superior to the Scripture. There is the Scripture plain and clear on certain things, and yet they are above the Scripture. They even claim that the Lord has shown them that a certain course is right, when the Scripture is as glaringly against it as anything could be. If it were necessary, I could begin to take a whole handful of scriptures and show how they are violated and a theory is gathered around them which excuses from the precision of God's mind as revealed in His own Word. Satan used Scripture to try to seduce the Lord Jesus into complicity with himself -- spiritual fornication. "It is written, He shall his angels charge concerning thee..." (Matt. 4:6). But the Lord Jesus saw through his suggestion, saw what it would lead to, what it implied, saw that the result of following Satan's course would be something contrary to the revealed mind of God. It is easy to use Scripture to support us in a way that we would like to go.

Now the Word of God gets down to motives, and here were two teachings which resulted in a practice and a life which was contrary to, and claimed to be superior to, the Word of God -- fornication, things sacrificed

to idols, and so on. Yet there is another teaching that undercuts even that, and results in another sin, well-known in those early times, that it does not matter how you behave: you are saved and you will never be lost; rest upon the eternal security of the believer and behave as you like -- an iniquitous thing. It was that kind of thing the Lord was up against. It may be in very gross forms and it may be in very simple forms, but the point is -- this will not do for the bride. The bride must be transparent, pure in motive, doing nothing to gratify personal ends, having no arguments to support personal interests.

"Thou hast a name that thou livest, and thou art dead." Profession without reality. That will not do for the bride, by any means. "Thou art neither cold nor hot". Indefiniteness, an absence of real character; not clearly defined and unmistakable as to your life and position, so that everybody knows exactly where you are and what you are, and there is no mistaking it. The bride must be like that.

Perhaps enough has been said to indicate that what is in view here, in these messages to the churches and to us, is the quest for bridal conditions, summed up in those words: "Christ... loved the church, and gave himself up for it; that he might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing." That is the heart of chapters 2 and 3 of the book of the Revelation; that is the bride. The Son's satisfaction, the Father's satisfaction, and the answer to all the Holy Spirit's activities, is found in a people after this kind.

The Calling of the Whole Church

We must dismiss another thing: the idea that the bride is a select company, chosen and appointed to be like this. We must make no such distinction and discrimination between the church given as a whole and the bride. The whole church is called to this -- that is the revelation of the New Testament; not only some, but the whole church. Whether the whole church will arrive, or arrive at the same time, is an open question, but we are all called to it, every one. This is incumbent upon us all, not merely upon some called "overcomers", a "bride", "firstfruits", and so on. This is the church in view. There may be those who move ahead of others, who go on more rapidly than others, who satisfy the Lord more quickly than others; the others may lag behind and come on afterwards; but whether all attain unto the same glory or not, this is what we are all called to. None of us is excused by any provision made by the Lord. The Lord has not got pigeon-holes already fixed, saying, "We put first-class Christians in there and second-class Christians in there, and provide for them accordingly." He has only one pigeon-hole in view. If you do not come into it He has not provided a place for you anywhere else, and He has told you that you will lose very much. It is a very serious thing not to answer to Him in the primary way.

The Bride, the Wife of the Lamb

"The bride, the Lamb's wife." Do not ask the mechanical question, Who will be in the bridal party? Who will comprise the bride? There again you are mentally dividing things up. I can tell you at once who will be the bride. Not a certain number of people who are called to be the bride, as different from others, but those who come to the bridal position spiritually. They will be the bride, and that is open to everyone. The bride is not a technical term belonging to a certain class, order and section of Christians. It is a spiritual term belonging to a condition, a spiritual state.

"The bride, the Lamb's wife", is the term here. "The Lamb's wife" -- what does that mean? The Lamb was one who suffered in meekness. "As a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and as a sheep that before her shearers is dumb, so he opened not his mouth" (Isa. 53:7). The Lamb went that way: the bride will know

the fellowship of His sufferings, and must be of the same spirit of meekness. No standing for her own rights, upon her own dignity, asserting her own interests, but letting go to the Lord, in self-emptying and meekness. That is the Lamb, and that is the bride, the Lamb's wife, taking her character from Him.

The Lamb in the Midst of the Throne

Ah, but there is the other side. There is a Lamb in the midst of the throne. There is the wrath of the Lamb -- the Lamb shall make war. The mighty "beast" rears himself -- what a terrific force is represented by the "beast" here. He is let loose in all his ferocity and malignity and evil and mighty power. And then the Lamb makes war and smashes the beast, destroys him. The LAMB does it. There is a mighty power bound up in this weakness. Oh, we have not yet learned the strength of weakness, the strength of emptiness, which means that there is nothing in ourselves but everything in the Lord. When the Lord gets people there, the enemy is afraid; something is going to happen. We can never overcome the enemy while we are standing up for our own rights, while we are in any way defending our own interests, looking after our own name, being something or trying to be something or hold on to something. The enemy laughs at us, breaks us. When we know that meekness of the Lamb, the meekness of Jesus Christ, then the enemy's power is going to be weakened and destroyed. These are principles in the book.

The wife of the Lamb is going to be with Him in His throne. Let us dismiss the symbolism and grasp the principle and the spiritual meaning. It is absolute ascendancy in Heaven over all the forces of the earth and hell, vested in the Lamb, and conferred upon His bride, the Lamb's wife. It is the mighty power of a yielded life, the mighty power of weakness of the right kind -- that is, of dependence, conscious dependence upon the Lord.

The Pearl of Great Price

In conclusion, I want to come back for a few moments to the matter of the pearl. It is a remarkable thing, the place that the pearl has in the New Testament. If you look in the Old Testament, you will not find it anywhere. When precious stones are mentioned in the Old Testament, the pearl is never included. It was something upon which the Jews set no special value. They had great ideas of the sapphire and the beryl and the onyx and all the other precious stones, but the pearl they despised. It was therefore almost a shock to them when the Lord Jesus began to speak about the merchant man and a precious pearl. It was an entirely new idea, investing the pearl with a value and preciousness which was strange to them, new to them. In the New Testament the pearl has a significant place. Right at the end, we find that the very gates of the city are pearls. We know the pearl is formed through suffering -- therein lies its preciousness -- and the suffering leads to beauty and glory.

The bride is to know "the fellowship of His sufferings". "If we suffer, we shall also reign with him" (2 Tim. 2:12, AV). There is an "if" there, a governing "if". It does not say, "If we are saved, we shall reign", "If we become believers in the Lord Jesus, we shall reign." It does not say that in the Scriptures. It says: "If" (and only "if") "we suffer, we shall reign with him." It is a very constituent of the bride that she shares His sufferings, pours out her very life-blood -- it may be in a spiritual way, it may sometimes be in a literal way -- for her Lord. Her life goes for Him as His life went for her. There is such a moving together that one life is given for the other, and vice versa. That is the bride.

Now are you, apart from all the words and ideas, seeing God's point? Why do we gather for "conferences"? If you were to come here between conferences, you would find that the threefold ministry of the New Testament was going on: the seeking of the material, the bringing of souls to be material for

the House of God; the building-up ministry; and this ministry of bringing into view the full thought of God, God's requirements as to the utter revelation of His mind. It is this last that is the object of these conferences. These are not "material-gathering" meetings, evangelistic meetings, much as we are concerned for the unsaved, very truly so; and these are not just "building-up" meetings, for teaching and instruction -- though they are that. But they are not JUST that. The crown of the ministry is to keep before the Lord's people the fullness of His intention in the church; to measure up, to call back, to make adjustment, to judge things; and to satisfy our Lord's heart in the ultimate, consummate sense of His desire, as expressed in the bride.

It will involve in sufferings, in the wrath of the enemy. It will mean that we are not let off with our flaws and failures. The Lord comes again and says, "There are many good things, but I am not accepting anything less than My standard." He must do that -- we are involved in that. But oh, it is a great destiny, the destiny of the bride -- no less than His throne, nothing short of His throne: to be with Him in the administering of His great universal kingdom through the ages of the ages. May the Lord bring His call and challenge to our hearts.

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