

The Cross and the Person of Christ

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Cross is essential to understanding the Person of Christ, and the Person of Christ is essential to understanding the Cross.

Scripture: Jeremiah 17:9, Matthew 27:46, John 3:14, John 8:27, John 11:25, Acts 2:24, Romans 8:1, 1 Corinthians 1:18-25, 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, Hebrews 10:5

Topics: "The Cross", "Union with God"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that the true understanding of Christ's Person is inseparable from the Cross, and vice versa. He explains that the disciples initially struggled to accept a Christ that included the Cross, as it contradicted their expectations. The Cross reveals the essence of Christ, which is union with God, and it is through this union that the lie, enmity, and death resulting from the Fall are annulled. Sparks highlights that true knowledge of Christ comes through experiencing His death and resurrection, leading to a restored relationship with God. Ultimately, the Cross is essential for understanding both the Person of Christ and the nature of our union with God.

Transcript

It is of far-reaching importance and vital consequence to recognize that the Person of our Lord cannot really be known and understood apart from the Cross. It is equally of consequence to realize that the Cross is only really understood and adequately appreciated when the Person of Christ is discerned. These two work hand-in-hand and are mutually dependent.

Who Jesus Is

In the days of His earthly life His disciples and the people wanted a Crossless Christ. They could see no place for the Cross. It was a contradiction of all their hopes and expectations. Whenever He referred to it a dark shadow crept over them, and they were offended. Indeed, they revolted quite positively against the idea and suggestion.

Running parallel to this inability to discern the meaning and the value of the Cross was, on the one hand, His continual reference to His own essential Person as Son of God, and on the other hand, their total inability to recognize Him. Only in fleeting flashes of illumination did one or two of them see Him as such, and then, it would seem from their behavior that they lost the realization, and the general clouds of uncertainty wrapped them around again. The state and position in which we find them when He has been

crucified indicates how the reality of His Person had failed to possess their innermost life. But the interesting and significant thing is that the Lord all the time indicated that this twofold inability would be removed when actually the Cross was an accomplished fact. The eighth chapter of John's Gospel is a strong example of this. In it Jesus is concentrating everything upon the question of His Person.

"I am the light of the world.... The Pharisees therefore said unto Him, Thou bearest witness of Thyself; Thy witness is not true. Jesus answered... My witness is true; for I know whence I come, and whither I go; but ye know not whence I come, or whither I go. They said... where is Thy Father? Jesus answered... Ye know neither Me, nor My Father; if ye knew Me, ye would know My Father also.... He said unto them, Ye are from beneath; I am from above: ye are of this world; I am not of this world.... They said therefore unto Him, Who art Thou? Jesus said unto them, Even that which I have also spoken unto you from the beginning" (8:12-25).

Then comes the statement which is the turning point of everything.

"Jesus therefore said, When ye have lifted up the Son of Man, then ye shall know that I am He" (8:27). (But read on to the end of the chapter.)

By something more than implication Jesus had laid down the same principle with Nicodemus. Nicodemus was groping in the shadows as to the Person of Christ. "We know that Thou art a teacher come from God..." Jesus pointed out that, in order to "see," something must take place by which a new faculty is obtained; a new birth is necessary. Then He led Nicodemus on to the Cross, using the same phrase as is in chapter eight: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up" (John 3:14). The law enunciated is that it will be the Cross which discloses Who Jesus is.

Union With God Secured For Man In Christ

Within what we have just said lies the very essence of the significance of Christ. Let us look briefly at that essential content. What is THE thing for which Christ stands preeminently in the whole revelation of Scripture? The answer is UNION WITH GOD.

That has been the thing for which man has been in quest as long as man has been a sinful creature. In almost countless ways and by as many means he has sought that peace and rest which is to be had alone by oneness with God. Somewhere, somehow (the Bible shows us) a fellowship with God was lost. Three things became the abiding and ever-active marks of this rupture of relationships. One - the lie; two - enmity; and three - death.

The Results Of The Fall

(a) A Lie Believed

Man has not only believed and accepted a lie; but it has entered into his constitution, and he is a deceived and darkened soul. Of himself he neither knows, nor is capable of knowing or being, the truth. "The heart is deceitful above all things, and it is exceedingly corrupt; who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9). Man was told that if he took a course contrary to that laid down by God and assumed the right to use his own reason INDEPENDENTLY OF GOD he would be "as God." He accepted the lie, made his bid for supremacy, enthroned his reason in independence, and was taken charge of by the lie. The outworking of this has been - and is - a tremendous development of human achievement by which man has become a lord in his own right (as he thinks) and blinded to the fact that destruction and distress are an ever-growing fruit of his

science. So much is this so that the question has been seriously raised by men in a position to ask it, as to whether science is a greater benefactor than it is a curse.

It must be remembered that most unemployment, with its many consequent miseries and troubles, is due to science which has supplanted men by machines, and human skill by mass production. The same responsibility lies at the door of science for the ability to destroy men and the earth on such an immense scale as was unthinkable a generation ago. Project the present course and pace into a few more generations, and what sort of a world will it be? Of course, the argument is not that science is in itself necessarily evil, but our point is that man believes that he is all the time improving, when, as a matter of fact, there is no moral elevation corresponding to the intellectual development.

This matter is not followed out in any measure, but from the simple indication given it can surely be seen that mankind is riding a lie in the form of a tiger which will tear him to pieces. But the strength of the lie lies in the fact that man does not recognize it, he is blind and in the dark as to its nature and source. This is all the Devil's spite against God.

Footnote: Note of a Scientist.

"Both history and science give us warrant for believing that humanity has made great advances in accumulating knowledge and experience and in devising instruments of living, and the value of all these is indisputable. But they do not constitute real progress in human nature itself, and in the absence of such progress those gains are external, precarious, and **LIABLE TO BE TURNED TO OUR OWN DESTRUCTION**" (italic ours).

(Surely this - a mere fragment of a whole volume - bears out the words of the Apostle: "And so the word of the Scripture comes true: 'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, I will make nothing of the intelligence of those who profess to know'... God makes the wisdom of the world foolishness, for as it was in that wisdom that the world lost the knowledge of God, it was by reason of that that its eyes were closed, and lo! the wisdom of God now appearing is proclaimed as a foolish thing, foolish in the sight of that old wisdom. It does not commend itself to the old wisdom... Christ is the wisdom of God, and the power of God. There is more wisdom in God's 'foolishness' than in men's cleverness" [1 Cor. 1:18-25].)

(b) Enmity Established

The same is true as to the matter of enmity. It is never a far cry from personal interest and self-realization to war and bloodshed. We do not read of much history between Adam's bid for personal glory and Cain's murder of his brother. The two are one in principle. Whether it be in individual cases, as at the beginning, or in the case of millions locked in deadly destruction of each other, the root is found to be man's desire to acquire. The name Cain means acquisitiveness, or possessiveness. We must be perfectly honest about this. The Christian Church is no exception to this rule. Christians have become divided into thousands of parties, and a very great many of these are antagonistic to each other, or at least distantly suspicious of one another. The enmity amongst believers is taken account of even in the New Testament. It is the Devil's work every time, but even the Devil must have his ground. This he has in the old-creation nature of man. Every division amongst the Lord's people is - in essence - the same as the enmities of the warring Godless world. It is traceable to some old-creation element of self asserting itself. There never was - nor will be - a truly Christly division among Christians. Every such division is somewhere a denial and contradiction of Christ. The apparent cause may not be some flaming fleshliness, but it will nevertheless be other than the way of Christ. Enmity is a mark of interrupted, arrested, or broken oneness with God;

there we leave it for the moment.

(c) Death

The third feature of this destroyed union with God is death. If life is the perfect adjustment and harmony of man with God, then man has not got life. The New Testament assumes this, it does not argue it. Death is not - in the Bible sense - cessation of being, nor is it a state of inanimation. It is just a separation from the source of true life, with all the incapacitation which that separation involves. Spiritual death is a powerfully active thing, and in all the things which really relate to God's will it works out in a mighty "cannot."

For the realization of all God's designs and purposes, and the constituting of the creation which He intends, the possession of His own Divine and uncreated life is essential. Man, by nature, does not possess that life, and humanism is one of the most subtle and popular - and the most devastating - forms of the Devil's lie. Hence, man as he is cannot see the Kingdom of God. Union with God is a matter of possessing God's life. That provision is an impartation by new birth. Thus we are led up to both the Person and the Cross of Christ.

In Christ A New Humanity

While there yet remain depths too profound and dangerous for even enlightened people of God to attempt to explore, the one thing that is clear as a conclusion is that the Incarnation is intended to set forth the union between God and man, and man and God, which is the Divine intention. Here we have very God joining Himself with very man. But - and let it be well understood - not with sinful man, or with our fallen humanity. God prepared that body - "that holy thing" (Heb. 10:5; Luke 1:35). When Christ came into this world there came with Him a humanity which - while being humanity - was different from all the rest. There were therefore two humanities, one represented uniquely by this solitary Person; the other, by all the rest of men. But even so, His humanity was but a probationary one. Inasmuch as the animating principle of His physical being was blood, He was subject to tiredness, hunger and thirst, and therefore capable of dying and seeing corruption. That He did die but did not see corruption was due to the sovereign intervention of God, and was due to the moral perfection - or holiness - of His nature. "Thou wilt not suffer Thy Holy One to see corruption" (Ps. 16:10). The probationary condition of Christ wholly related to His redemptive vocation. When that was accomplished, He still had a human body, but no longer animated by the blood-principle or basis of life. Now - while a body - it is a "spiritual body," and therefore a glorified body. It is not unto the likeness of Christ's earthly, pre-resurrection, body that we are to be conformed, but "like unto His glorious body" or "body of glory!"

(Footnote: I am aware that what has been said above may raise a question as to the "incorruptible blood" of Christ, but my point is in no wise a question as to His moral nature, simply one of His being placed on the basis of life - for the time being - which made it possible for Him to die physically. "Corruption" is only regarded in this sense, not spiritual or moral. I am also aware that physiologists have not yet ended their debate on the seat of corruption, i.e. as to whether it is the blood. But I think that the Bible indicates that it is.)

We are pointing out that in Christ God and man have come together, yet in a Man altogether other than ourselves. This is why union with God - which is the major revelation of the Bible, revealed consummately in the New Testament - is always and only in Christ. Until we pass over on to the resurrection life-basis it will always be a faith position in Him; not an actual one in our mortal flesh. But more on this later. In Christ God has His perfect satisfaction, and has therefore committed Himself to Him. The union is perfect.

The Lie, Enmity, And Death Annulled In Christ

But this implies or postulates that the threefold result and mark of the broken union is absolutely ruled out and non-existent in Christ. Or to put it round the other way, Christ is the opposite and the negation of the lie, the enmity, and death. So it is that the most spiritual and heavenly revelation of Christ, as given in John's Gospel, is in terms of life, light, and love. Light and truth are interchangeable names. In this record Christ makes these things far more than abstractions, He makes them personal, and says, 'I am these.' There is no darkness, shadow, lie, or lack of absolute transparency in Him. There is no enmity, strife, schism, or warfare in His nature, nor in His attitude or relationship toward men AS MEN (only with evil in the world and in men). In Him there is no separation from the Fountain of life. He can say, "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). All this negation of the results of broken union with God was because there was no self in Him. It can be easily seen that the whole effort of the Devil - in its many forms - was to get Him to act on some line of self. Self-interest, self-realization, self-defence, self-preservation, self-pity, self-independence, self-resource, etc., etc. To have succeeded in this matter at any point would have been to drive a wedge between God and Man anew, and to have defeated the whole plan of redemption. But the pure ground of utter selflessness was maintained at greatest cost and through most fiery trial, and the prince of the world was helpless. The union remained intact. Life, light, love are triumphant because self is utterly negated. But this is all as to Himself, and thus far it remains His uniqueness. He abides alone if it stays there.

Christ's Humanity Shared - By The Cross

So we pass on in John's Gospel to the point at which certain ones come saying, "We would see Jesus" (John 12:21). To this enquiry or quest Jesus makes a reply which means two things. One: 'To see Me as others are seeing Me here and now is not to see Me at all; that is to see and not perceive.' The other: 'To really see and know Me, union with Me in an organic way is necessary; that is, what is true of Me in My relationship with My Father and His relationship with Me must become true in an inward way where you are concerned.' Hence: "Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abideth by itself alone; but if it die, it beareth much fruit" (John 12:24). 'I did not come to "abide alone." What is true of Me as to union with the Father is meant to be for you IN ME.' But at this point we are carried by the Person to the Cross. "Now is My soul troubled; and what shall I say? Father, save Me from this hour. But for this cause came I unto this hour" (John 12:27). And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Myself. But this He said, signifying by what manner of death He should die" (v. 32-33).

The Apostle Paul has covered this whole ground in one comprehensive, illuminating, and explanatory statement. We indicate the points of emphasis.

"The love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that One died for all, therefore all died (in Him); and He died for all, that they that live should no longer live unto themselves, but unto Him Who for their sakes died and rose again" (2 Cor. 5:14-15).

Someone has freely translated some of the above thus:

"I behold the love of Christ, I see in His one death the death of all of us already accomplished after the manner of His death - the death of ALL THAT SEPARATES US FROM GOD."

This is all saying very strongly that, to really know Who Christ is as the One in Whom alone God and man are brought together, we must come to the Cross in an experimental way. We must apprehend His death

as ours, and then, also in experience - through faith - know a risen life in Him in which the old self-life has been put away.

The Person Of Christ Illumined By The Cross

But we must step back for a moment. What was the real meaning of the Cross and what did it effect? All we have said about the Person of Christ was true of Him altogether apart from the Cross. For Him the Cross was no necessity. There came a time, however, when He had to be made what He Himself was not. To redeem us, He Who knew no sin had to be made sin in our room. In that hour He was placed in the position of man as the victim of Satan's lie with its darkness. So also was He made to take upon Him the enmity of our fallen state, and in that deep experience, in that REPRESENTATIVE position He lost the consciousness of the Father's love. There remained but the third phase of that responsibility - death. For one terrible, eternal "hour" Christ was separated from - lost union with - His God. "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46). The mystery is too deep for us, but the fact and the reason are clear and unmistakable.

So He died, "He tasted death" - awful death, which is the full and naked consciousness, awareness, realization of utter separation from, and abandonment by, God! But in HIMSELF He was God's sinless Son, and, as such, He could not be holden of death (Acts 2:24). In virtue of His essential sinlessness He survived the wrath which rested upon what He was made for that dark hour. He overcame and destroyed the causes, the ground, the strength and the originator of death.

"By weakness and defeat

He won the meed and crown;

Trod all our foes beneath His feet,

By being trodden down.

He hell in hell laid low,

Made sin, He sin o'erthrew;

Bowed to the grave, destroyed it so,

And death by dying slew."

It took more than a man to do this. "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19).

Thus in the Cross all the cause and nature of separation from God was destroyed, and in Christ risen that union is perfect FOR US. "There is therefore now no condemnation to them that are in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 8:1).

This perfect no-condemnation fellowship with God, made actual by the Holy Spirit taking up residence within us through our believing into Christ, is the possession of those alone - but is surely the birthright of such - who have come to the Cross in realization of separation from God, in deepest longing for restored fellowship with Him, and in acknowledgment that sin is the cause. Thus, looking to Christ crucified as the Author and Perfecter of salvation, they discover that He is more than a man, even man at his greatest. They discover that in Him - and in Him alone - God is found.

Then it works the other way. Can we imagine what Saul of Tarsus felt like - he who had believed Jesus of Nazareth to have been but a man and an impostor among men, and to have been executed as a fraud and blasphemer - when he saw on the Damascus road that this Glorified, Exalted One was God's Eternal Son? It needed a time in Arabia to let the implications of that adjust and revolutionize his whole outlook.

When we see Whose Cross that was it puts the Cross so far beyond all human ideas of 'dying for ideals,' 'heroic death for a great cause,' and all such lesser and altogether inadequate interpretations of Christ's death.

"Ye killed the Prince of Life" (Acts 3:15) was the charge laid at the Jews' door by the Apostles.

So we come back to our starting point. It requires the Cross to really see Who Jesus is; and in the seeing of Him truly by the Cross we see how great, wonderful, sacred, and awful is that Cross.

No wonder that Satan has ever sought to take from His essential Person and make Him something less! No wonder that he has so persistently sought to strip the Cross of its truest meaning! Let all who do either of these things recognize from whence their inspiration, or blindness, comes, and with whom it is that they - though unintentionally - are in league.

Let Christians also realize that all enmity; lack of love, divisions, and strife; all prejudice, suspicion, and spiritual blindness; with all spiritual death, is because the Cross has not been apprehended aright. Somewhere uncrucified flesh is holding the ground. It is impossible to be a truly crucified man or woman and at the same time either have personal interests or be at variance with other children of God, i.e. without love for them. The essential basis of life, light, and love - which is Christ in full manifestation - is the Cross as a working reality in the realm of the old creation, and the Risen Power of Christ in the new.

All this is but saying in other words that the Cross of Christ brings us into living union and oneness with God, and if we will but live in the full meaning and value of that union we shall be living epistles of Christ in terms of life, light, and love. Failure in these means failure somewhere, and for some reason, in our fellowship with God in Christ. The measure of our walk with Him will be the measure of these three features of Christ.

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