

The Meaning of Christ

by T. Austin-Sparks

Christ is the central figure of the Scriptures, the meaning of all things, and the key to understanding the purpose of creation.

Scripture: Malachi 3:1, John 1:3, John 17:1, John 17:21, John 17:23, Acts 17:31, Romans 8:29, Colossians 1:15, Hebrews 1:1-3

Topics: "Union with Christ", "The Greatness of Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the profound significance of Christ as the central figure in all of creation and scripture, asserting that He embodies the meaning, heirship, nature, and ultimate test of all things. He highlights that Christ's greatness is not only recognized in heaven but also sensed by humanity and opposed by hell, showcasing His redemptive work and divine satisfaction. The preacher illustrates that union with Christ is the core of God's revelation to humanity, encompassing various aspects of faith such as election, redemption, and sanctification, all radiating from Him. Sparks urges believers to understand that Christ is the key to interpreting the universe and the standard by which all will be judged. Ultimately, he calls for a deeper appreciation of Christ's role in the divine narrative and our relationship with Him.

Transcript

1. HIS GREATNESS IN THE SCRIPTURES

He is

- (a) The meaning of all things.
- (b) The Heir of all things.
- (c) The Idea or Nature of all things.
- (d) The final test of all things.

2. HIS PLACE - BY THE LOVE OF THE FATHER

INFINITE DIVINE LOVE THE MOTIVE AND POWER

This is revealed

- (a) In all the Scriptures.
- (b) By the opposite of love to all Divine activities.
- (c) By the Father's demand that the Son be honored.

3. THE GREATNESS OF CHRIST IS SPIRITUAL AND MORAL

- (a) Heaven knows it.
- (b) Man senses it.
- (c) Hell attests it by attempted corruption.

It is implicit in

- (a) His satisfaction to God.
- (b) His redemptive work.
- (c) The Spirit's operations.

"These things spake Jesus; and lifting up his eyes to heaven, he said, Father..." (John 17:1).

"That they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us" (John 17:21).

"I in them, and thou in me, that they may be perfected into one" (John 17:23).

Introductory

Union with Christ is the heart or center of all that has been revealed of God's thought concerning man and of man's relationship to God. Union with Christ is like the hub of a mighty wheel. There are many spokes to that wheel - election, creation, redemption, salvation, sanctification, glorification; and then, like a series of subsidiary spokes - repentance, faith, justification, conversion, regeneration, and so on. These are the spokes of the wheel, but they all center in Christ and radiate from Christ and reach the rim, which is God. They unite us in Christ with God.

To give all this its true and full value, it is necessary to contemplate or have revealed to us the meaning of Christ, to see what an immense thing has taken place by the Son of God becoming the Son of man, by God becoming incarnate. It is a question of our being taken, not into Godhead or Deity, but into God's Son incarnate.

Now, the first preachers of the Christian evangel preached Christ. They did not, in the first place, preach salvation or sanctification or forgiveness or judgment or heaven. That does not mean that they did not preach those things they did; but not in the first place. They preached Christ, and all those things were included in the preaching of Christ, Christ as inclusive of all and as transcending all; for, after all, such things as salvation and sanctification, forgiveness, justification, are subsidiaries, they come afterward. Christ was before them all and Christ will be after them all. They are inside of Christ, but He vastly outstrips them all.

The Meaning of Christ

We come, then, to consider the meaning of Christ. Understand that we are underlining the title CHRIST. That very title carries the significance of a mission. It is not the title of His essential Godhead. Anointing, which is what the word means, is unto a mission. "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth" (Acts 10:38). Let that govern all that will be said, otherwise it might be easy, if you were so inclined, to raise your eyebrows at different points and scent, as you might think, false doctrine. In our consideration of union with Christ, we are keeping a very distinct line between His Deity and His Christhood as Son of man. Having said that, let us think now for a little while of His greatness.

1. His Greatness in the Scriptures

His greatness as in the Scriptures is seen in several relationships.

(a) In His Relationship with God

Firstly, His greatness is seen in His relationship with God. Here we have only to cite several familiar passages, but always with new inspiration and stirring of heart.

"Who is the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15).

"The effulgence of his glory, and the very image of his substance" (Heb. 1:3). Quite remote from our comprehension and understanding, and certainly from our explanation; sharing the Divine glory before the world was. We commenced to read of it. "Father... glorify thy Son"; and then just a little further on, "Glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with thee before the world was" (John 17:5). I say, we can never begin to understand or evaluate the meaning of union with Christ until we have sensed something of that stupendous thing which has happened in His coming forth out of such a state and, in the form of man, going the way of the Cross. The most amazing thing that has ever happened in the whole history of the universe is found in the combination of the words which I have just quoted from the Scriptures. And then, that this Man who was the effulgence of God's glory, and the very image of His substance, "the image of the invisible God," sharing the Divine glory before the world was, should be spat upon, mocked, jeered at, and meet all that terrible sin. It is wonderful that we should be called into union with Him; not just to be His friends, not just to be fellowworkers or partners in some Divine business, not just to have some kind of formal relationship with Him which we call a Union, but to be one with Him in an utterness which we are going to see later. "We are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones" (Eph. 5:30. A.V.) "Joined to the Lord... one spirit" (1 Cor. 6:17). Something has happened to make that possible, and therein is the whole story and wonder of the infinitude of God's condescending love. Well, the Scriptures, in the first place, set forth His glory, His greatness, in His relationship with God, and many hours could be spent in tracing it out. We pass on.

(b) In His Relationship With All Created Things

Next, His greatness is seen in the Scriptures in His relationship with all created things. Our analysis divides this into four heads.

(1) The Meaning of All Things

Christ is the meaning of all things.

"All things were made through him" (John 1:3).

"The world was made through him" (John 1:10).

"One Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things" (1 Cor. 8:6).

"In him were all things created, in the heavens and upon the earth, things visible and things invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things have been created through him, and unto him" (Col. 1:16).

"Of the Son he saith... Thou, Lord, in the beginning didst lay the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the works of thy hands" (Heb. 1:8,10).

"It became him, for whom are all things, and through whom are all things..." (Heb. 2:10).

The meaning of all things; that is, the "why" of all things, the answer to the question, What does it all mean? Go abroad in the earth, plunge down into the ocean, soar into the constellations, compass the created universe, comprehend all celestial intelligences and say, "What does it all mean?" and the answer will be in a perfected universe showing forth and expressing the glory of the Son of God, Son of man, and so you will know what it all means. That is no flight of imagination. That could easily be tested and proved up to a convincing point. Given that we had the ability and a certain mass of data, with Divine enlightenment resting upon it, that is capable of substantiation now. If we knew the inner meaning of the created things, we should see Divine meanings, eternal, spiritual meanings, all of them finding their explanation in Christ. That, of course, is a universe of inexhaustible wonder, but that whole universe, the Scripture says, is going to be filled with Him and manifest Him eventually, and when this universe, redeemed and perfected, reaches the end for which it was brought into being, it will be one mighty, comprehensive and still inexhaustible expression of God's Son. That is the meaning of it. He is the key to everything that is happening.

Oh, that we had eyes to see and understanding to grasp the significance of things that are happening! Christ is the explanation, He is the meaning of all things.

(2) The Heir of All Things

Christ is the heir of all things. "God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets by divers portions and in divers manners, hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things" (Heb. 1:1,2). The question immediately arises, When did God appoint Him heir of all things? Well, if all the former passages are right, Christ was appointed heir of all things before ever He made them. If all things were made through Him and unto Him, there was a point at which the Father made Him heir of all things, and it is just on that very matter of His heirship that history turns. Firstly, then there was the marvelous conception of this universe as constituting the inheritance. You do not need that I should strain at trying to say anything about the universe as a conception. Then there is the conception projected, with a view to its being brought into execution, followed by creation, and immediately, or very soon it would seem; the inheritance disputed and marred, but instantly its redemption revealed. Redeemed, reconstituted, perfected, possessed: that is the history of the inheritance, and what a lot that history contains. I said a minute or two ago that if we understood all that is going on, we should see that it centered in and raged round Christ. Why? Because He is heir of all things, and this disputing of His inheritance is the reason for all that is going on. Oh, how much Scripture could be crowded into that. The

destroyers of the earth, what are they doing? Well - blindly, of course - but through their evil inspiration and instigation, they are seeking to destroy the inheritance of God's Son, and because spiritual men and women are the best evidence of that fact, they know the concentration of more than ordinary forces upon them for their destruction; for they are the redeemed of the Lord being reconstituted and perfected unto a presentation to Him as His rightful inheritance at last in glory. We know that this is true, that it is the inheritance of God's Son which has involved us in this long, long story of destructive intention from evil powers.

(3) The Idea or Nature of All Things

Further, Christ is the Idea or Nature of all things. I think here we only need two brief quotations.

"Whom he foreknew, he also foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29). The Idea or Nature of all things is expressed in those words, "the image of his Son." The other passage which is from Ephesians 4:10, I think bears that out. The object of His ascending up on high was "that he might fill all things." Those two complementary statements answer this Idea or Nature of all things. What is the Idea behind, what is the Divinely intended nature of all things? Well, just the image of His Son. Of course, that embraces the whole of that comprehensive teaching of the New Testament of likeness to Christ. It is a far-reaching and all-governing idea in the New Testament, likeness to Christ, or, as it has often been put, Christ-likeness. That is the Idea of the existence of all things, that is the Nature of the being of all things; to be filled with Him and conformed to His image. You never will be conformed to His image unless you are filled with Him. How much New Testament teaching you can put into that. It is everywhere.

(4) The Final Test of All Things

Lastly, Christ is the final test of all things. In Acts 17:31 we have these words: "He hath appointed a day in which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men, in that he hath raised him from the dead." The literal rendering is not, by a man, but "in a man whom he hath ordained." That word "ordained" means horizoned. God has made His Son the horizon of everything. Everything has to come within the horizon of this man and be judged according to Him. You see the point. Christ is the criterion, Christ is the standard, Christ is the measure of that great judgment of the world which God has fixed, the final test of all things.

That means that the judgment of the world will be according to how it measures up to Christ, its standing in the light of Christ, as to its attitude toward or relationship with Christ. God will not judge on any other ground. That is a very simple formula for judgment. If God had to take us one by one and judge us on the numerous things which belong to us by our inheritance, our birth, our upbringing, by the fortunes or misfortunes of our lives, well, He would have His hands full, speaking after the manner of men, and it would be something that would require a standard of righteousness so infinitesimal, so exhaustive, as to be almost unthinkable. God is not going to judge us upon the number of our sins, whether few or many, or upon our temperaments, or upon anything like that at all that comes down to us in the bloodstream. His one simple solution is, What is your attitude to My Son? What is your relationship to My Son? How do you stand here in the horizon of Christ, not just as a person, but in relationship with Him as a kind, what He means in Himself? What is your attitude, relationship and measure where the Son is concerned? On that all judgment will be based.

And notice, that is a very righteous judgment. It says "he will judge the world in righteousness." Thank God, that takes in the very thing that so many complain of through their lives, the disadvantages of their

inheritance, of heredity, of early training and so on. My dear friends, take heart from this, that on none of those matters is God going to judge at all; it would be unrighteous. He brings us all down to the one issue of our relationship to His Son. Where do you stand with Him? What have you done with Him? What are you making of Him? How are you progressing in your conformity to His image? That is the basis of judgment, and the only one. Christ is the criterion, the final test of all things.

Christ in the Old Testament

Well, let us return again to this contemplation of His greatness as seen in the Scriptures. If we take the Scriptures as a whole, we find that the Old Testament is shot through with expectation and anticipation. From the very beginning someone is demanded, someone is foreshadowed, someone is proclaimed, and someone is manifested in the midst of the nations; for this Someone was manifested in Israel whom God planted in the midst of them.

Let us look at that for a few minutes. Someone is demanded, demanded because of a calamitous failure which has brought the whole creation under arrest, into what the Bible calls vanity. Failure has made of the whole creation an abortion. Someone is demanded by reason of that failure, someone is required to repair it. Someone is demanded by intuition. Man feels intuitively that someone must come sooner or later.

This expectation and this demand can be traced in very remote civilizations. Universally we find the evidence of this waiting for something, this expectation that someone must come to answer the enigma of life and the world. The whole thing is an enigma, a problem, a puzzle. Man is an abiding quandary, everything is a great contradiction. Many of those who have probed the most deeply in order to try to explain the problem have been driven into blank, terrible despair. Yet man MUST solve this problem. The Bible is just full of that.

But by continuous intimations someone is demanded. It seems as though there is a reaching of a certain point, and now there is an intimation that something is going to happen, and then it recedes, and after a time it comes on again like a tide, only to recede once more. These successive tides in history intimate all the time that something will happen, or someone will come; until you reach the day when He did become incarnate, and the spirit of expectation was ripe in just a nucleus, a remnant. They were waiting, expecting. "The HOPE of Israel" (Acts 28:20). That hope was not only the hope of Israel, it was the hope of the whole creation. Paul tells us that the creation was subjected in hope (Rom. 8:20); it was there throbbing throughout the centuries. Someone is demanded along every line, and that demand is revealed in the Scripture.

Someone is shadowed forth. The Old Testament is full of the shadowing forth of someone in personal types and in symbols, and, although typology and symbolism and the figurative aspect of the Old Testament has perhaps been a bit overdone and sometimes discredited by exaggerations and straining, there does lie right on the face of things, without any straining at all, a whole system which speaks of something other than itself. It demands that which it signifies, typifies, symbolizes, for men cannot live for eternity on symbols, on types, on figures, on foreshadowings. Someone must answer to all this!

Someone is therefore proclaimed. The whole of the Old Testament contains the proclaiming of a someone by the Spirit of prophecy. Immediately Adam falls and the tragedy of sin occurs, the seed of the woman, who should put all this right, is brought into view and proclaimed. He is again proclaimed in Abraham - "In thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 22:18). In Jacob: aged and dying, Jacob, in blessing his sons, came to Judah, and proclaimed those beautiful and classic words - "The sceptre shall

not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the obedience of the peoples be" (Gen. 49:10); a bringer of peace looked for out of Judah. Did He come of Judah, He whose Name is Peace, Shiloh? All that while ago was He proclaimed. In Moses - "Jehovah thy God will raise up unto thee a prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me" (Deut. 18:15). Ours is an unfortunate translation in its use of the words "like unto me." It just gives a wrong turn to what Moses actually said. "Jehovah thy God will raise up unto thee, of thy brethren," not "like unto me," but, "as he raised me up." You can think about that. How did He raise Moses up? But here is the prophecy of the coming of this prophet. Then you want to read the whole statement in Deuteronomy 18 and 34. In both those chapters you will see that the reference is to a greater than Moses. Well, we cannot go on. All the prophets prophesy of Christ, they were all proclaiming Him.

We close with what is perhaps the most difficult aspect and most difficult thing to say, but I believe it is here. This someone was manifested personally in the midst of the nations, that is, in Israel. You will recall the many theophanies, Divine appearances in man-form in Israel, and you will recall that in not a few instances it is impossible to discriminate between the one who is called the angel and the Lord Himself. They are interchangeable terms, synonymous words. Of the same person, first the word "angel" and then the word "Lord" is used. The angel, as it seemed, took up the conflict with Jacob, and he eventually cried, "I have seen God face to face, and my life is preserved" (Gen. 32:30). That angel of the Lord appeared to Abraham and was confessed to be the Lord. The Lord said to Israel, "Behold, I send an angel before thee, to keep thee by the way, and to bring thee into the place which I have prepared. Take ye heed before him, and hearken unto his voice: provoke him not; for he will not pardon your transgression: for my name is in him" (Exod. 23:20,21). Who is this? Paul said about the smitten rock, that the rock was Christ (1 Cor 10:4). But do you remember this, and this is the point of the whole incident, that when the Lord was giving commandment to Moses about smiting the rock, He said, "I will stand before thee there upon the rock" (Exod. 17:6). It was the Lord who was the rock, says Paul; it was the Lord who was smitten to save the life of His people, and you cannot smite the Lord twice. Once smitten, and, blessed be God, that is enough. Then it is said that the rock followed them (1 Cor. 10:4), meaning, I think, that the waters of the rock, the values of the rock, the efficacy of the smitten rock, went with them on their way "and that rock was Christ," it was the Lord. "I will stand before... the rock." So I could gather up many other of these instances, where the identifying of the one called the angel of the Lord cannot be made without saying that it was the Lord Himself, and, seeing the connections, you cannot but see the Son of God. If that wants proving, go to the last book of the Old Testament, where mention is made of the messenger of the covenant. "The Lord, whom ye seek, will suddenly come to his temple" (Mal. 3:1). That word translated "messenger" is the same word translated elsewhere "angel." Who is this angel or messenger of the covenant? "The Lord, whom ye seek, will suddenly come to his temple... But who can abide the day of his coming?" It is none other than the Son of God. But there He was manifested in Israel, again and again personally present, not as yet incarnate, but in manifestation nonetheless.

Well, there is the Scripture. Now, you see, that is the Old Testament. It is shot through, we have said, with expectation, and anticipation. Someone must finally and fully come to answer to it all.

We know that the New Testament, on the other hand, is just brimful of testimony that all this related to and was fulfilled in Christ. The Bible says, in a word: HE, CHRIST, MUST BE MADE EVERYTHING OF. When we have glimpsed something of His greatness, we are at least in the way of glimpsing the wonder of union with Christ. Oh, what a great thing it is! Surely we can now confirm that with which we started. It is the hope of everything. Everything centers in Him and radiates from Him to the bounds of God's created

universe. Union with Christ is the heart of all the revealed thoughts of God concerning man and man's relationship with God.

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