

The Transcendent Thought of Sonship

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of sonship and spiritual fullness in Christ, and warns against the peril of making Christianity into another Judaism.

Scripture: John 4:21-24, Acts 13:33, Romans 8:19, Ephesians 1:23, Hebrews 1:2, Hebrews 2:5, Hebrews 2:10, Hebrews 3:6, Hebrews 6:1, Hebrews 12:5-7

Topics: "Sonship", "Spiritual Growth"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the profound significance of sonship as presented in the Letter to the Hebrews, illustrating that true sonship is not merely an initial relationship with God but a mature and responsible state of being that reflects spiritual growth. He highlights the importance of moving beyond spiritual infancy to embrace the fullness of life in Christ, warning against the dangers of stagnation and the temptation to revert to earthly traditions. The sermon connects the concept of sonship with the divine purpose of bringing many sons to glory, underscoring the spiritual nature of this relationship and its implications for believers. Sparks also draws parallels between the teachings in Hebrews and the Gospel of John, emphasizing the inner, spiritual relationship between the Father and the Son. Ultimately, he calls for a recovery of life and fullness in Christ, urging believers to transcend mere tradition and embrace the living reality of their faith.

Transcript

Having, in our consideration of the message of the "Letter to the Hebrews," identified the all-inclusive object as the fullness of Christ, we proceed to crystallize that object, or see that it is here crystallized, into the Divine meaning of sonship. This thought runs right through the letter, but at points the keynote is struck with particular emphasis.

1. THE SON. "Hath at the end... spoken... in His Son" (margin: a son; literally sonwise). (1:2).

"Thou art My Son." (1:5).

"But of the Son He saith." (1:8).

"Christ as a Son, over His (God's) house." (3:6).

2. THE SONS. "...bringing many sons unto glory." (2: 10).

"My son, regard not lightly the chastening of the Lord... and scourgeth every son whom He receiveth... God dealeth with you as with sons... the Father of our spirits." (12:5-7,9). (See also "brethren," "children").

"Ye are come... to the church of the firstborn... enrolled in heaven." (12:22-23).

The central truth then, around which all else circles, and in the light of which all else must be read, is the mystery or hidden nature of sonship. There is no greater thing in all Divine revelation than the thought and purpose of sonship. But this letter shows (as do other parts of the New Testament) that sonship is not an initial relationship but an ultimate one. It is not what is meant by being born of God or being a child of God, although sonship is implicit in that, but it is the maturity and therefore responsibility of those born of God; it is just that motive of all the exhortations, entreaties, encouragements, and warnings in the letter, at one point set over against unduly delayed growth in the words "Let us go on to full growth," (6:1). Let us hasten to mention that we are not thinking or speaking of Deity. We are not called to that unique Sonship which belongs to Christ as Son of God in terms of Godhead, but we keep strictly to what is meant by the use made of the words of the eighth Psalm in chapter two of this letter with its backward relation to Adam and its forward relation to Christ and the "many sons," "brethren," "children," "partners". So then, sonship means spiritual full growth which carries with it the placing in responsibility to govern the world to come (2:5).

The great implication, if not obvious statement, of this letter as a whole is that all "children" of God will not "go on" to realize the full meaning of their birth, but, while they may not lose their life, they may lose their "calling" or the full intention of their birth.

Thus, we are able, by recognizing the governing object of this letter, to link up with those things which show what sonship means. There are many such links; we can take but two of them.

The first obvious link is between "Hebrews" and the fourth chapter of John's Gospel.

The New "Hour" Of The Son

"...the hour cometh, when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall ye worship the FATHER... the hour cometh, and NOW IS, when the true worshippers shall worship the FATHER in spirit and truth: ...God is Spirit: and they that worship Him must worship in spirit" (John 4:21-24). (The emphasis is ours.)

Now, everyone knows that the all-governing object of John's writings was to bring out Christ's Sonship. A study of relevant words - "Father," "Son," etc., will serve as an initial indication of this.

But a second unmistakable characteristic of those writings is the essentially spiritual nature of everything in relation to Christ. Here is a simple example. With Christ a new "hour," or day, or dispensation has come, and in this new day geography, place, material building, traditional association, religious centre, or ecclesiastical hierarchy have nothing whatever to do with it. It is now an inner relationship of a spiritual nature between Father and son. So chapter four follows chapter three in John. "Hebrews" just develops John 4 and gives the so-much-greater range and content of its implication. Thus, in the first place, sonship is a heavenly thing. It takes its rise in heaven: "born from above" (John 3:3, margin). Then it is an inward thing like a heavenly well, springing up unto life eternal (John 4:14), and it is not in any way earthbound. "Neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem." It is not historical but eternal; not temporal, but spiritual. As the Letter to the Hebrews so quickly passes from the personal to the corporate, from the individual to the family, so in "John" there is a distinct point at which there is a transition from the many personal and

individual incidents to the gathering of all those separate features into a corporate company in which the full glory of the Son and of sonship is to be expressed. This consummation is reached in chapter 17.

Another clearly defined link between "Hebrews" and the Gospels is seen in the Transfiguration, and this sees sonship in its consummation, as what we have just said sets forth its initiation and nature.

The Consummation Of Sonship

On the mount of transfiguration three things are noted.

- a. Moses and Elijah; corresponding to "divers portions and in divers manners" (Heb. 1:1).
- b. Jesus glorified; corresponding to "we see Jesus... crowned with glory and honour" (Heb. 2:9). (See also II Pet. 1:16-18.)
- c. "Hear ye Him"; corresponding to "God... hath at the end... spoken... in His Son" (Heb 1:2).

Thus we have,

- a. A new dispensation:
- b. Taking its character from Jesus in heaven, glorified.
- c. The absolute fullness and finality of God's work and speech in His Son.

Let us here remind ourselves of the supreme conflict that has ever circled round this matter of sonship. In the case of the Lord Jesus Himself it was the focal point of all the fierce controversy and bitter hatred. It was the point of Satan's personal and direct attack: "If thou be the Son." Later, demons referred to it through their victims of possession. It was the occasion of the Jewish assault, and it headed up in the combined assault of devil, demons, and men, issuing in His crucifixion. Paul not only regarded the Jews as responsible for His death, but said the "principalities and powers" invested Him in the cross, and He stripped them off (Colossians 2:15).

The battle was carried on against the Church, and almost every New Testament letter has as its object the urge and constraint of believers not to stop short at spiritual infancy or immaturity, but to go on to fullness. This fullness is what is meant by and involved in sonship. There is nothing so feared and hated by Satan and his powers as sonship in its full attainment and expression. As "Prince of this world," having wrested the kingdom and dominion from Adam, he loses it to the Son of God - the Son of Man; and the full and universal manifestation of that loss is to come with "the manifestation of the sons of God," that Body of Christ which is "the fullness of Him," the "partakers of a heavenly calling" to have dominion over the world to come (Rom. 8:19; Eph. 1:23; Heb. 3:1; 2:5).

Any ministry or instrumentality which has real spiritual full growth and sonship as its anointed function will meet what such has ever met; firstly from the enemy himself directly and nakedly, then from whatever direction and means he can find available. If he cannot directly destroy, he will seek Balaam's method of subterfuge. His one persistent method through the ages has been to divert the people of God from the Son to a system.

The Letters to the Hebrews, the Galatians, and the Romans are outstanding instruments of God in relation to this very thing. Thus, early in "Hebrews," in bringing in the sons with the Son, mention is made of a

matter which is much more fully developed later. It is that of

Death In Relation To Sonship And Spiritual Fullness

The inclusive statement in this connection is in chapter 2, verses 9, 14 and 15:

"That... He should taste death for (in behalf of) every man." "That through death He might bring to nought him that had the power (hold) of death, that is, the devil; and might deliver all them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage."

The question of life and death is later taken up and opened out in relation to priestly function. Aaron and his successors were unable to bring anything to fullness and finality because death broke in in every case and cut their work short. Melchizedek is then introduced as type of another priesthood. "Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like unto the Son of God after the power of an endless life" (7:3,16 and context).

You will thus see that sonship, eternal life, and spiritual fullness are linked together.

Death is the great enemy of spiritual fullness, but death is - in this letter and everywhere else - not just a physical matter. Israel is here spoken of as having died in the wilderness and is used as a warning to Christians. But the warnings have to do with the purpose of salvation in its fullness. Death is a spiritual thing, and it is an enemy ever seeking to ambush the child of God. So this whole letter is one solid and comprehensive document and treatise on the fact that spiritual life can be curtailed, arrested, and thwarted of its possibilities by the child of God being brought down, even in a religious way, to an earthly position with all the trappings of a bygone dispensation, and losing the essentially heavenly and spiritual position. "Dead works" the writer calls them (6:1).

In chapter 1, verse 5 we have a quotation from the second Psalm related immediately to sonship in Christ.

"Thou art My Son, this day have I begotten Thee." That quotation is made again in chapter 5, verse 5, in relation to His endless-life Priesthood. In Acts 13:33, the same quotation is made as prophetic evidence of the resurrection of Christ, and thus, sonship and resurrection are linked. This does not mean that Christ was not Son before the resurrection, but the New Testament shows that in resurrection there is a feature of sonship which was not there before, namely that Christ is "the firstborn among many brethren" in resurrection. As Peter puts it "hath begotten us... by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." We are not thereby incorporated into Christ as Son of God in the sense of Deity, but as Son of Man in a new creation family.

For the moment, then, the point is that the new life of resurrection union with Christ as the principle of sonship must not be put into the old wineskins of earthly traditions and systems, but into the new wineskins of an entirely heavenly and spiritual order. This was probably the occasion of this letter. It was possibly written as an appeal to the strong section of Hebrew Christians in Jerusalem who found the ever-widening trend of Christianity too much for their conservative habits of Judaistic thought. As the cleavage between the Temple and the Synagogue on the one hand, and the Church and the Apostles on the other, became more marked, the Judaisers were inclined to snap the new ties for the old. The new wine was bursting the old wineskins, and, like many today, they were not prepared for that. But the issues were, and are, infinite.

Thus we have arrived at one of those infinite issues which are exercising most Christians and Christian bodies today, the issue of

Fullness Of Life In Christ

Yes, life in fullness is the question. Many bodies of Christians who have a great past and great tradition are deeply concerned with the inadequacy or lack of life amongst them today. This poverty of life is leading to great organized efforts, largely outside of the churches, to try to bring fullness about. Its lack has been the occasion for the abnormal development of many spurious and pseudo-spiritual movements and teachings. For want of it multitudes are passing by the churches as things which do not count. In many ways the great enemy has triumphed against the Church by countering its very life impact and testimony. A major and largely inclusive way of this achievement is the specific point of our letter. Make Christianity into another Judaism, i.e., an earthly religious system of precepts and practices, and you have made it dead! Is not this the point at chapter 6:1-6? I am not one of those who believe that the Apostle was there referring to Jewish ordinances. Some of my reasons for this are these. Chapter 6:1-6 must be read strictly in conjunction with chapter 5:12-13. "The rudiments of the first principles (or beginning) of the oracles of God" are the same as "the first principles of Christ," linked together by the "Wherefore". Jewish ordinances were not the first principles of Christ. They were the "dead works" referred to in the phrase "Repentance from dead works." "The teaching of baptisms" does not refer to Jewish "washings". It is the teaching as to the difference between John's Baptism (or any other) and baptism into Christ. Acts 19:1-6 ought to settle this conclusively; and note the context of 18:25. (What a pity that the chapters are divided where they are, instead of after 18:23!) In this same place (Acts 19:6) the "laying on of hands" (Heb. 6:2) is seen as a doctrine of Christ, not a Jewish ordinance. No, the point of the Apostle is that, having laid this sixfold foundation we should "go on to full growth." Life only begins in the foundation; its fullness requires the whole building. The peril is that even the first principles can become another legal system imposed upon people, and thus the things intended to lead to fullness of life may be made an arrest of life. Satan is very clever.

The recovery of life and its constant increase unto final fullness will only be as we get away from mere tradition and earthliness to a new living apprehension of Christ in His fullness as a Divine Representation of God's thoughts for His people; away from types, figures, symbols, to spiritual realities. Even if there are to be expressions of "first principles" they must come out of the living reality, and not be mere forms and things in themselves. We must do nothing with a view to perpetuating forms of doctrine and practice, but the expression must be that of life, and the spiritual meaning and value of everything must be ever growing. Only so shall we "go on to full growth".

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