

This Matter of Christian Unity

by T. Austin-Sparks

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the necessity of Christian unity as a powerful witness to the world, rooted in the work of the Holy Spirit and the glory of Jesus' Name.

Scripture: John 13:35, John 17:21, Ephesians 4:2

Topics: "Witnessing to the World", "Christian Unity"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the critical importance of Christian unity as a foundational element for effective witness to the world, arguing that disunity undermines the church's mission and credibility. He highlights that true unity is not merely a spiritual concept but must be manifested in practical love and cooperation among believers, as Jesus prayed for in John 17. Sparks warns against superficial approaches to unity that ignore the deeper spiritual realities and stresses the need for a mental revolution among Christians to overcome divisions rooted in spiritual immaturity. He asserts that the glory of Jesus' name should be the unifying force for all believers, guiding their actions and decisions. Ultimately, he calls for a return to the Holy Spirit's lordship to achieve the oneness that Christ desires for His church.

Transcript

"By this shall all men know..." (John 13:35). "That the world may believe..." (John 17:21).

Unity as a Priority in Witness

Some battles are lost before a blow is struck or a shot fired. Others are only partly won and much enemy territory unoccupied because of sabotage behind the campaign. To change the metaphor, which is quite in keeping with the matter in hand, some buildings which have cost much in time, labour, and means, become leaky, discredited and sometimes disintegrate, because of -- as Ruskin puts it -- a lie in the foundations. Sooner or later it finds the builders out. It is therefore a matter of considerable, if not absolute, importance that we have a right and adequate basis of assurance for certain success BEFORE WE START. For, if a start is made without this basis, early reverse or arrest may take place, or at most some way will be made only to find that crippling troubles bring serious limitations and heartbreaks. The FULL end can never be reached if the beginning or basis is faulty.

Let us firstly look at this matter of Christian unity as it is viewed today. That there is a real and considerable regret for the existing condition needs no arguing: there is! But while that is so, there are different or various reactions to it. Many feel that the situation is so far gone and established that it is just

pure idealism and a counsel of perfection to think and hope for an adequate change. They have therefore surrendered to a counsel of despair and taken the attitude that we must do the best we can under the circumstances and make the best of a bad job. Others have resolved the problem -- to their own satisfaction -- by saying that there is good in every part, however divided the parts may be, and we must take the good, make the most of it, and try to ignore the bad. Such a position carried to its logical issue could result in a rapprochement in the most diverse realms, and there is no end to it. There are yet others who take a purely spiritual position and say that we are "all one in Christ", and the earthly situation must be ignored. This is an unreal, unsubstantial position which evades or bypasses facts which are a contradiction to it, and still leaves the world without what Christ said is needed "that the world may believe". This does not mean that the last mentioned position is not the true starting point for the rest; it is, but it is not enough, and falls short of the world-convincing evidence. There are other more or less definite reactions to this situation, but they are all as superficial as those mentioned.

Many, taking one or other of these attitudes, because of the immensity of the difficulty, have decided that the thing to do is to get on with the job, be "practical", and leave these matters to those whose inclination it is to spend time on them. For such it is not "practical", but a waste of time, to go back to the chart room and make sure that, with all the good motive, the labour, cost, and devotion, we are after all on the right course or in a position to achieve the purpose. To return to the metaphor used earlier, it is of SOME consequence that we do not carry in our very make-up, though not realised, the elements of defeat and disintegration.

Through the centuries and at this time in a very saddening way the work of God is handicapped in so many of its fresh efforts even before they are launched. In his sermon class, when students were preaching sermons with a view to advice and instruction on how to preach or NOT to preach, Mr. Spurgeon listened while a young man built up a sermon on "The Whole Armour of God". Graphically and with some zest the student pictured himself as taking up and putting on the armour piece by piece, and waxing more and more pleased with his effort he flauntingly cried at last: "Now, where is the devil?" Mr. Spurgeon cupped his hands round his mouth and called in an audible whisper -- "He is inside the armour!"

Is this not so very much the case in the church on this earth? With all the grandeur of her message, the truth of her doctrine, the cost of her work, she is so largely defeated. There is something inside telling against her. The convincingness of oneness, real unity, is sabotaged.

The fact is that the church -- by which is meant Christians in their relatedness -- is much more ready to do, launch out in, and undertake Christian work, than she is to secure the essential for its success.

But we must get to grips with the situation, for this is not an accusation, or mere statement of a case; we have to do something to at least indicate ways of healing of this open sore.

Let us look closely at the situation at the beginning. It is clear and needs no stressing that the mission and commission of Christ was to all the world. That means that, whether all the world would believe or not, the appeal was that "ALL should come to a knowledge of the truth". There were few, if any, new facts of an objective kind added to potential witnesses once the resurrection and ascension or glorifying of Christ were established realities. All the essentials of the message were in hand and a full gospel could there and then have been preached. But the Lord commanded them that they should wait. The reason given was until the Holy Spirit should come and they should be empowered for witness. Yes, true, but we may be too superficial as to our apprehension of what that meant. We hurry on with a "power" mentality, and do

not look deeply enough to see what it means. The obvious things are taken to be all. Tongues, boldness, convincingness in proclamation, and such like things are regarded as being the chief marks of the Pentecostal baptism. But there was something more than public ministry or verbal testimony with its manifestations bound up with the tarrying issue -- the advent of the Holy Spirit.

The Prayer of Christ

Christ had prayed about this witness to the world. The issue involved was the proof that He had been sent from the Father. He knew what the subsequent centuries have proved, that it would not get far with men -- the world -- to just preach that God sent His Son into the world; stupendous a fact as that was with all its implications. And whatever may be the other and accompanying features of the Holy Spirit's coming upon them, the fact is that, in His prayer, Christ concentrated upon one factor as fundamental to effective witness -- the oneness of His own.

The convincingness of testimony, the impact and registration of heavenly truth, the evidence by which reactions would be judged, was -- in His heart -- behind the things said or how they were said; behind their courage and their ecstasies (which would sooner or later be turned down as fanaticism, psychological, etc.). That background to all else was -- with Him -- this, "that they may be one". His prayer went deeper and to the very root of all else. It is not good enough to say that He meant something that was a basic, spiritual, and heavenly fact without any manifestation and evidence to the world or concrete earthly expression. We cannot, in all honesty, take refuge from the problem in such construing of His words. No, we have got to face the truth and the present problem and be perfectly honest in our dealing with it. The primary work of the Holy Spirit would be to constitute a "Body", and to MANIFEST its organic oneness. All else would come out of this, and hang upon it. Apart from this all else would fail of fullness, and the measure of life and power, therefore of effectiveness and fruitfulness, would be governed by this oneness. Any injury to this would be a challenge to, and arrest of, life, and a contradiction to an undivided Christ.

When we take the deeper look we see how very true this was in those first months of the church's testimony, and we are not surprised that to arrest or weaken this mighty campaign of victory -- to say nothing of bringing reproach upon Christ -- the great enemy saw that discord, division, and internal disaffection was the essential strategy. The more he succeeded along this line, so the more difficult became the work, the weaker the testimony, the less the authoritativeness, the more unconvincing the doctrine, the fuller the self-occupation, and so the straitening of resources, and the creeping in of other unspiritual methods and institutions. Men have had to take responsibility for, and bear the burden of, a whole fabric of organisation and its maintenance extra to that for which the Holy Spirit once took custodianship. Questions which arise and must be answered are -- Did the Lord only mean a spiritual or "mystical" oneness apart from -- so far as the church is concerned -- an expression of it? When, at special times the Spirit has given a wonderful and convincing manifestation of this oneness and something akin to the beginning has taken place, many souls saved, all barriers between Christians completely out of sight as though they had never been, is this to be taken as the divine idea for all time, or is it meant to be only in periodic visitations? Is it the heavenly normal or abnormal?

Sooner or later such a situation arises, either between two, a local company, a wider body, or in the world at large, where EVERYTHING for any future at all hangs upon a MANIFESTATION of mutual love, SPIRITUAL and expressed unity (not organised union!). Preaching and the "Work" may have to be suspended. Public meetings may have to discontinue. All the external may be driven from public procedure. Persecution and national laws may suppress all forms of organised activity. The very life and

continuance of the testimony will then hang upon this one thing, spiritual and practical unity.

Having said that, we are committed to the main business in the present situation of assailing the problem, and here we must summon up all the honesty and courage possible. There never was a matter in the church's history which called for more honest and courageous facing than this one, for it makes the most stupendous demands; no less are these demands than is the magnitude of the established system which contradicts the Lord's mind as expressed in His prayer. To proceed to the practical demands of the situation without defining the real basis of unity, and securing an adequate dynamic for action, would be foolish and futile. Therefore we must look at the spiritual foundation as we have it in the New Testament.

We have seen that the coming of the Holy Spirit upon or into the first nucleus of the church, or the church at its beginning, brought about an inward and organic unity and oneness which was more than -- and basic to -- any outward and objective expressions. The statement that Peter stood up with the eleven is more significant than perhaps we have recognized. It may have been spontaneous and undesigned; or it may have been the custom when preaching, but it at least indicates the dismissal of all reserve on the part of any one, and that they were really moving together in a spontaneous way. It was the impromptu expression of a common and corporate power and principle which had taken up inward residence and control. Given this inwardness of union by "one Spirit", and fully recognizing that, before all else, they were baptized in one Spirit, and therefore themselves of one Spirit, we have our starting point. There is no hope for Christian unity, and Christ's prayer cannot find its answer, apart from every Christian being definitely in possession of, and possessed by, the Holy Spirit. The absolute Lordship of the Holy Spirit sets aside all other lordship. The meaning of this we have yet to show in our consideration of practical demands, but it will be hopeless unless this inclusive starting point is accepted and experienced. Too much is taken for granted on this matter, and sufficient concern must be felt for unity as to lead to real exercise of heart before the Lord that the Holy Spirit shall really be Lord and produce the fruit of His Lordship. Thus, before all else, Christian unity is the result of a definite and mighty work of the Spirit of God in believers. When this is granted we look to see the first and predominant feature of this unity as manifested at the beginning. Is there one thing that can be seen and recognized as the hallmark of the primal oneness? We think that there is. It was THE GLORY OF THE NAME OF JESUS.

Spontaneously the one expression, unifying passion, concerted action, and characterizing feature was enshrined in "The Name". Christianity was NOT A NEW TEACHING.

Not a New Teaching

There is nothing in the whole story upon which to rest an argument or affirmation that the apostles went out to the world with "The teaching of Jesus". They were not propagating new doctrines or a system of truth. Although they were charged with preaching a "strange doctrine", they were really only affirming certain facts. To Jews they expounded the Scriptures. The doctrinal parts of the New Testament mainly come out of the acceptance of Christ, and were for the instruction of believers. Ninety percent of the New Testament is for believers. The teaching was a result, not a cause. The most the apostles ever did was to substantiate their testimony from the Scriptures, and affirm certain facts concerning the person of Christ.

Not a New Religion

Christianity was not set over against or alongside of other religions and made "comparative". It was some time before some of the apostles themselves realised the implications of their testimony in the matter of their being emancipated from Judaism. Great as the change was, they did not realise that they had

changed their religion. They found themselves out and committed against their own prejudices, and had to do their thinking and discussing after the thing had become a fact in embarrassing experience. See Peter in the house of Cornelius, and the events of Acts 10, 11, 15, etc.

Not a New "Movement"

No plans were laid. There was no policy. Pre-organisation was entirely absent, and any which subsequently had to be admitted was forced upon them by the embarrassment of the very vitality of things, and then it was of the simplest, and always spiritual, not merely official.

A thought-out campaign did not exist. To set up, launch, form, bring into being, or found a new society, sect, "church", community, was not in mind. They did not set out for such, and although their testimony gave distinctiveness to all who believed, and outsiders labelled them and misinterpreted their motive and purpose, the distinguishing feature was life, producing an organism.

All-inclusively it was the proclamation and affirmation of a fact. That fact was -- and is -- the universal sovereignty and Lordship of Jesus Christ as the Son of God established and vindicated by the resurrection from the dead; and this was all summed up in "The Name". Everything was "in the Name of Jesus".

The issue of the first preaching and response thereto was the command to "Repent, and be baptized... in the Name of Jesus". James seems to indicate that this was the time -- i.e. the time of their entering into Christ -- when that name was called upon them (James 2:7, margin). This is in keeping with much in both Old and New Testaments as to the church -- or House of God -- having His name put there. From that point onward there is a very comprehensive range of activities in the Name. Healing, prayer, preaching, agreement, being gathered together, authority over Satan and demons. It was "for the sake of the Name (that) they went forth". They rejoiced "that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for the Name".

But with all the activity there was firstly the fundamental unifying bond of the Name, and then the living, working, and having their conduct governed by the honour and glory of the Name. Our point here is that if the passion for the honour of the Name were as it was then there would be no room for other names which divide, whether of people or things, and there would be the most powerful dynamic for dealing with everything contrary thereto, especially division. The question which would decide every issue would be, "Does this glorify the Name of Jesus?" If not, NOTHING must stand in the way of that glory. The Holy Spirit -- the Custodian of the Name and its glory -- would signalize His good pleasure by doing again what He did then.

Reverting to the prayer of the Lord in John 17 it is important to note that the matter of oneness has two phases. Verse 11: "that they may be one". Literally it is: "that they may keep on being one". Verse 23: "that they may be perfected into one" -- perfect state as the goal. There is a basic present state of oneness which is to be known, recognized, cherished, diligently preserved, by "all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love", for "there is one body, and one Spirit, even as also ye were called in one hope of your calling" (Eph. 4:2,4). This procedure upon the basic oneness will issue in a being "perfected into one"; "till we all attain..." (Eph. 4:13).

It is at this point that all the difficulty and trouble begins. Right here we find the gap in which the whole history of divisions began and has its occasion. Few will disagree as to the BASIC unity "In Christ", but few will agree that the MANIFEST unity is as it should be. Between the two there certainly is a big gap with a tragic and grievous history. Argue as we may to justify much of it, if we are spiritually minded and honest

we shall have to acknowledge that one thing is responsible for it: that is that DIVISIONS ARE THE RESULT OF SPIRITUAL IMMATURITY.

Spiritual Immaturity

That can be said in different ways: delayed or arrested spiritual growth; a low and weak spiritual condition; a state of spiritual ignorance or unenlightenment; a failure to walk in the Spirit; a living in the "flesh"; a misapprehension, or a limited apprehension of the real nature and meaning of the new birth; a blindness to the real heavenly and spiritual nature of the church; and, inclusively, not seeing the meaning and significance of Christ as in the eternal conception of God and heaven. These are all matters of the most profound and vital importance, and they touch the issue of spiritual oneness in manifestation most positively. While in the letters to the Ephesians and Colossians we have the church presented as in completeness, and with regard to its calling, conduct, and conflict; with certain practical features of its life here: when we want to know something about its building we have to visit a locality like Corinth, for there we shall find all the cause of the situation in which the church so largely is in our time, and the principles by which alone that situation can be changed. That divisions, contentions, jealousies, etc. are due to spiritual immaturity, or unduly prolonged spiritual babyhood, is definitely and positively stated there. The whole section of chapters one to four of the first letter to the Corinthians has to do with this; and chapter twelve is its remedy.

But when we have noted all the features of this condition, one thing is shown to be the key to everything -- malady and symptoms. That fundamental factor and principle is the mind or mentality of those concerned, and the upshot or issue resolves itself into THE DEMAND FOR A MENTAL REVOLUTION.

Renewing of the Mind

That mental revolution is what Paul calls "the renewing of the mind". It was the mindedness of the believers in Corinth that resulted in ALL the spiritual arrest and painful disorders. It was Jewish mindedness and Gentile mindedness, i.e. nationalistic (1 Cor. 1:22,23). It was man-mindedness, i.e. the mind of the natural (soulical) man (ch. 3:3,4; ch. 2:14). The natural and carnal mind is continually set over against the spiritual mind in this letter. It is all a matter of the "earthly" man overshadowing the "heavenly" man. It has not yet been sufficiently realised by the Lord's people that the natural mind is the realm in which the evil powers -- Satan himself -- have the foothold.

In Matthew 16 we have a most startling example. Peter, on affirming Christ to be "the Son of the living God" had been told that "flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father, which is in heaven". Only a few verses further on Jesus is found addressing the same Peter thus: "Get thee behind me, Satan; thou art a stumblingblock unto me: for thou mindest not the things of God, but the things of men." What a crash from heaven to hell! "My Father" -- "Heaven" -- "Satan" -- "Men" -- "Flesh and blood". In this Letter to Corinth Paul contrasts the natural man with the spiritual, and the natural and "earthly" with the heavenly (ch. 2 and 15), and says, "flesh and blood" cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven. ("Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee.")

Satan is allied to the natural man, and when we live on that basis Satan can do his work of blinding and dividing. But we must remember that Paul was writing to BELIEVERS, which means that believers can live on that "natural" level and therefore give Satan his ground for his evil work. What a large field of spiritual instruction this opens up! But we must come to practical points. It is the entire mentality which is responsible for the state of Christianity today, and evangelical Christianity as much as any other.

Let us be perfectly frank. The present organised system which Christianity has come to be has involved Christians and their leaders in a set of situations which make it -- to say the least of it -- exceedingly difficult to escape a false, totally false, conception of unity and division. The work of God has become very largely sectional under names, titles, and designations, which represent either doctrine, technique, country, method, or nation. It would not be difficult to arrange "Churches", "Missions" and "Faiths" under such headings, but we refrain. If the reader will do it, the situation becomes obvious. But that is not all. The sections have their own clientèle. They must have their own personal and financial support. Funds must be obtained for their maintenance and development. There are many in them as "ministers" and officers whose livelihood hangs upon the increase of the number of "supporters". The piece of work, the church, the undertaking just MUST be supported and kept going. Clientèle is a tremendous factor, relating to many other factors.

It is this crystallisation of Christian work into a fixed system, settled, and so generally recognized and accepted, AS TO LEAVE NO PLACE FOR ANY OTHER -- any other being at once suspect -- that has set up an entirely wrong and pernicious situation with regard to unity. It is the "church", i.e. the denomination, sect, local congregation, mission, movement, form, order, doctrine (extra to the basic essentials of salvation) which now determine unity or schism. To leave one and go to another, altogether without a consideration for spiritual values is immediately named division, "sheep stealing", etc. We are going to pursue this to its roots, and seek to lay the axe there.

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