

The Christian Life, Christian Service, and the Church

by T. Austin-Sparks

I feel that it would be good and helpful to us all if we were to think together for a little while on the Christian life, the Christian service, and perhaps something about the church, and that in quite a simple way. That is, dealing with things in their beginnings, at their foundations - a thing which should always be profitable, however far on we may be.

The Christian Life

Well then, to begin with - the Christian life. The apostle Paul gives us one comprehensive definition of the Christian life when he uses that phrase - "a new creation". "If any man is in Christ, there is a new creation" (2 Cor. 5:17). Now, it is all-important that we should know where the Christian life begins or, in other words, where the new creation begins, not when it begins first, but where it begins. The Christian life or the new creation, begins not in us at all, but in Christ Himself. Until we have realised that and grasped it clearly and firmly, we shall miss the way. We shall go on perhaps some distance, and then have to go back again. The trouble with so many Christians is that they are having to go back to their beginnings to get adjusted there, and so it is of primary importance that we should recognize that the Christian life or the new creation begins in Christ Himself. We really do not come in at all at new birth until God has finished in His Son, Jesus Christ.

That is set forth for us in two ways in the Scriptures. Firstly, there is the creation, the earthly things representing heavenly things, and we know that Adam, the new man, did not come in until God had finished the creation outside, and that, as we have often pointed out, Adam, the man, had his first full day on the earth as a Sabbath when God rested from His labours. That is, man came in at the end of the creation, at the end of the works of God. God was nearing His rest when man came in, and that sets forth this truth in a simple way that in the new creation God completes His new creation work in His Son, Jesus Christ, who becomes the new World, the new Sphere, the new Life, the new Resource, the new Everything for the man to follow. God finishes it all in Christ and then we come in.

What the creation was to Adam, Christ is to us. The creation was Adam's world prepared for him; the creation was Adam's resource provided for him, everything was there for his sustenance, for his life, for his good. Christ is that, and all that the wonderful creation of God was for Adam, into which Adam was brought in its fulness and beauty, Christ is - a perfected creation, a realm aim, a sphere, a supply, an everything, and we come in when that is all finished, all settled, all ready. The new creation begins in Christ Himself, not in us.

But then there is another aspect of that same thing. The first Adam, and the last Adam, Jesus Christ, are both an exact expression of God's mind. The first Adam, before he fell, answered to God's own thought. "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness", and God created man according to His own thought, His own mind, and man in his unfallen state expressed the mind of God, of course in his case, not in a final sense, but an initial sense. That is, there would have been development unto still greater

perfections, although not corrective in any way, putting wrongs right, but the development of perfection in Adam. As it was, he satisfied God's mind at the beginning. The last Adam, the Lord Jesus, is wholly according to God's mind in the full sense and final sense. God has to add nothing to the perfection of His Son. God has to make no enlargement of the fulness of His Son; He has already filled Him with His fulness, He answers to God's mind.

Now then, it is into that fulness and that perfection that we are brought. Think of Adam unfallen and his children coming into that wonderful kingdom, that wonderful life, that wonderful inheritance, that wonderful relationship. Yes, but think of the Lord Jesus in the still more wonderful fulness, glory and perfection. Then think of ourselves as His spiritual children coming into that, into what He is, into all that is in Him.

The point for the moment is this, that God has reached His fulness and His finality in the Lord Jesus before ever He takes things up with us, before ever we come in. The new creation is in Christ Jesus. He is the new inclusive Man, the last Adam. That is where the Christian life begins. It begins in Him. Shall we say, He is the one, all-inclusive, all-embracing Christian, and you can only be a Christian in Christ. We cannot be Christians in ourselves. That is the trouble with a lot of people - they are trying to be Christians in themselves. It cannot be done. Unless we are in Christ and Christ is in us, there is no Christianity and there is no new creation.

Now you see what God is doing. He is working back to something which is already perfect. I wonder if I can illustrate that. I do not know very much about it, but I am tremendously interested in it, and always have been - that is, in medical matters. Now, I have to be very careful, but I believe that medical science is based on the belief that there is an original, perfect, archetypal man or body, and that all healing work is simply the effort to get back to something, to get back to a condition which has broken down. I can make that still more simple. It is never for the perfectly healthy and sound that you call in a doctor. But, if evolution were logically followed out, that is what you ought to do. It ought to be the perfectly healthy and sound people who are having the attention of medical science to try and produce another and still better kind of species than the one that exists, to reach something that man has never yet reached. That is evolution: we have all come from frogs, jellyfish and what not, and we are growing up and sometime we are going to be something very marvellous, something so much better than the very best that there is now in creation! Well then, medical scientists ought to be applying themselves to healthy people to get them to that other species that is to be! But they do not do that. Medical science is occupied entirely with those in ill-health who have broken down. What are they doing? Not trying to reach something that has never been, but to get back to something which was. They say, 'This is breakdown' - call it nervous breakdown, call it any kind of breakdown, it is breakdown. This is disorder. This is something which has gone wrong. That means, then, that there was something that had not gone wrong. It was all right somewhere in the remote past. There was a body which was not like this, and we must get back and get things right, get things straightened out.

The Lord Jesus Christ is that in the other realm, in the spiritual realm, in the things of God. He is the perfect original archetypal Man - the representative Man, God's model; and all spiritual disease, ill-health, breakdown, disorder, is departure from God's thought about man as represented in the Lord Jesus, and it resolves itself into this. It is departure from Christ, and all health and order and life is a return to the Lord Jesus, is

coming to the Lord Jesus, is conformity to the Lord Jesus, it is being constituted according to Christ. God has His model Man, His original Man, His perfect One in whom there is no breakdown, no disorder, no ill-health, spiritual or moral. And God comes out to work to bring Christ, His perfect Man, to be the Life, the Energy, and the Everything in a new creation; that it shall take its character from Him, that he shall be that. Christ is God's perfect Man. Well, there we begin the Christian life, that is where the new creation begins - it is in Him.

The second stage is that which we call new birth, being born again, or born from above. New birth, regeneration, or whichever of the different terms you may use for this same thing, is nothing other than the centring of Christ in the life, the putting of the Lord Jesus at the centre - firstly of the individual, by the Holy Spirit, into your spirit and mine; it is more simple to say, into your heart and into my heart. That is new birth. It is God's perfect One, God's full One, being put right into the centre of you and of me in the Person of the Holy Spirit. That is new birth, and that is where the new creation begins, so far as we are concerned. But what a tremendous thing that is! God has reached His end fully and finally in His Son: all perfection and all fulness is in Him. Then He is placed at the centre of our individual being in the Person of the Holy Spirit, and that is the beginning of the new creation where we are concerned. That is the beginning of the Christian life. What possibilities there are bound up with that! That is a tremendous thing. Paul speaks of it as the great mystery "which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Col. 1:27) - the centering of Christ in us.

Well, that implies something, because if the Lord Jesus is coming to be the centre, we cannot have two centres. There are no two centres to one sphere. If He is coming in as Lord, there can be no two lords for one kingdom. If He is coming in as sovereign Head, there are no two heads, and the Lord Jesus being put right at the centre of our being means the end of self, for self is the other lord, self is the other head, self is something altogether other than Christ and opposed to Christ. That is why it is never easy to be born again.

The new creation often comes in, so far as we are concerned, with terrific convulsions. You know that in many cases, if it is something which is very drastic and definite at its beginning, there has been a history of tears, unavailing crying to God, of seeking. Some have gone through a great deal before they actually reach the point of assurance and come to the place where they know it is done and they are at rest that they are in Christ Jesus and Christ is in them. In many other cases, while it is not in such a convulsive way, spread over years, you and I do not really come into the real good and value of the new creation until we have come to a crisis sooner or later. In the case of some of us, we do not have a convulsive conversion in the first instance like others have had, but we accepted the Lord, gave ourselves to the Lord, had some witness that something had happened and went on, and through the years the Lord dealt with us and headed up to a real crisis. We did not find in that crisis that we were somewhere further on in the Christian life. We were at the Cross of Calvary, we were there right on the spot with Jesus Christ crucified however many years we had lived as Christians. And however much work we had done as Christians, we were really only at the beginning so far as the meaning of things was concerned. After years we had a crisis, and it was the crisis of the Cross. The whole nature of that thing was the dethroning of self, even of self in the work of God, of self in serving the Lord, of self in the Christian life. This real getting

through to the place where Jesus Christ is centre and Lord is always a tremendous thing whenever it takes place.

That is the implication of Christ in you, that you are no longer the centre, but He is the centre; you are no longer the Lord of your life, He is Lord of your life. Headship is no longer with you, it is with Him. That is the very sum and substance of the new creation, of the Christian life. There is an entirely new and other centre and government of our being and that is Christ. All things are unto Him and all things are out from Him, and in everything He takes precedence and pre-eminence. There is no true Christian life which does not have Christ both at the centre and at the centre as Lord, as Master. God is only working in relation to His Son. All God's interests are focused in His Son, and the new creation is only in Christ Jesus.

Now, that is the beginning of the Christian life in reality, but having got that far, the Christian life becomes a progressive matter. It is all perfect and finished in Him, the Lord Jesus, but it has got to be perfected in us, and so we enter upon that new phase of things represented by those words of the apostle - "...foreordained to be conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:29), or "we all, with unveiled face beholding... are transformed into the same image" (2 Cor. 3:18). *A process begins from the crisis, and what is taking place is that the perfections of Christ are gaining the ascendancy in us. We are becoming less what we were in many things and becoming what we were not in other things, and it is all a matter of Christ growing, Christ enlarging, Christ getting the ascendancy. That is the Christian life as a progress, as a process. It is the progressive ascendancy of the Lord Jesus by which we are being conformed to His image.*

What I am trying to keep to very carefully is this, that it is all the Lord Jesus. You and I will never have any of this apart from Him. It will all be Himself – as the beginning and the process and the end. That is the Christian life. The end of it all is the beginning - it is Christ, and the life which is truly in the hands of the Holy Spirit is the life which, on the one side, is going to be continuously emptied of all self-resource, and on the other hand, is going to know Christ and Christ only as its life. We come to the place where we have absolutely and utterly nothing in ourselves and of ourselves, but it is not negative. We have learned that in the hour of deepest emptiness we have all things, we have Christ, and we learn, as we go on, never to take weakness and emptiness as the final governing factor. "When I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Cor. 12:10). That simply means, 'Oh, today I am conscious of the most utter weakness, emptiness, impotence and helplessness, but the Lord is my life, my strength, my salvation. I lay hold of Him. He is the criterion, not my condition.' It is Christ, you see. When we take that position, God always honours His Son, and He honours our faith. Christ alone is our life, but let us not say that with a drooping chin.

Christian Service

Well now, just a little word on the service of a Christian. It is the same as the Christian life, in principle. What is the service of the Lord? What does it mean to serve the Lord, to be the Lord's servant, to do Him service? Well, it means one thing in two forms, along two lines.

First of all, the service of the Lord resolves itself purely and simply into a matter of bringing Christ into others where He is not. You may call it soul-winning. You may call it

leading souls to Christ. You may put it in many of the ways which have become the common forms of speaking of this work of evangelism. We want to get right down to what this really is. We can never be content with getting people to make some kind of confession and leaving it there, saying that they accept the Lord Jesus or that they give themselves to Christ. This may be a necessary part of things, but any wise servant of the Lord will never leave it there, never be content with either a written or a verbal expression. The real work is to make sure that Christ is in, Christ is inside now. If you like to put it the other way, the Holy Spirit has come in and taken up residence. We want that assurance, and we should aim at that assurance. We should take pains to make it clear that that is what it means to be a Christian - not that you accept certain truths about Jesus Christ, not even the truths about His atoning work, but that you recognize that the only irreducible minimum of salvation is that Jesus Christ has come right into the life to be the life, to be the salvation, to be the Lord.

The service of the Lord resolves itself, on that side, to seeing Christ brought in, right into the heart. When that takes place, you need not have many more fears. You can have a great measure of assurance. You have not introduced something - you have introduced Someone, and what a One! Is the Holy Spirit competent? Is He able? Or is He a weakling and unable? Oh no, you can trust the Holy Spirit! I am quite sure that a great deal of our slowness in spiritual growth is because we do not trust the Holy Spirit in ourselves. The need is for us very often to turn deliberately to the Lord as within us and say, 'Lord, as within me, I trust You about this matter. I count on You in this connection.' And when it is a case of others, if you have assurance that the Lord has entered in, oh, you can trust for a very great deal! The Lord is able to do His own work. Well, that is the Lord's work, the service of the Lord, on that side. It resolves itself into the simple, but fundamental and all-inclusive matter of getting to the point where there is a definite recognition that everything is in the Lord Jesus and then the Lord Jesus must be within, the centre and the Lord.

Then there is the other side, the other line, of service - ministering not now to the unsaved, but to the Lord's people. That is the Lord's service and it again resolves itself into one thing, just one thing, and that is: ministering to the increase of Christ. The aim of all ministry to the Lord's people should be definitely the increase of Christ. All teaching and all preaching and all mutual ministry should never be just for imparting knowledge, however good and true the knowledge may be, but it should be for spiritual growth. That is why all ministry must be in the Holy Spirit. All that is merely information and teaching and material gathered together and passed on will not build up. If it is in the Spirit, the Spirit Himself is ministering Christ, and ministering to what is Christ unto its increase, its growth.

Growth depends upon life; ministry must not be formal. It must be living. It is a question of spiritual and living growth that is in view, so it is simply ministering to the increase of Christ. The end is the fulness of Christ, not our enlargement at all. Ministry may have the effect of reducing those to whom we minister, making them smaller and smaller, but if they are seeing how much greater Christ is than they ever saw, it is all right. And should this not be that, as we minister Christ, He becomes so great, so wonderful, that we realise how small we are.

I do not believe the Lord wants ministry to make us feel important. That is the aim of a great deal of preaching; it is all to bring the importance and the tremendous possibilities

of people into view, to inflate them and make them think something of themselves, of what they can be, to stir them to go and do it and be it themselves. Oh, no! True Holy Spirit ministry will bring Christ into view in an ever-increasing fulness and the result will be - 'Woe is me, I am a poor thing, but Christ is all'. 'Only a sinner saved by grace', but it is not the sinner saved by grace that is in view, it is the Saviour. The glory is all to the Saviour.

The Church

Now a brief word on the church. What is true of the Christian life in its beginning - Christ; and the Christian life in its progress - Christ; and the Christian service on both sides - Christ, is true of the church. It is exactly the same: it is Christ.

We do not begin the church with an order or a system. Let us be careful; we will have to get very clear about this matter. I am speaking about the Lord's people now in the corporate sense, not a place, not a congregation, but the church as a spiritual Body, a body of believers. And I am speaking particularly now with a thought for the local church, the local expression of the great heavenly church, the one Body. When we come to the church, be it the local expression or be it universal, we do not begin with an order or a system of teaching and practice.

The New Testament churches were not given an order in the first place. Do you realise that? What was subsequently given in the matter of order was given to meet disorder. I come back to where I started - this original man.

When in the New Testament you have that which relates to order in the church or churches or the house of God, it is given because things have become disorderly. There is no need for a specified system or order if there is healthy, spiritual life. You do not need a doctor if you are in good health, and the doctrine of the church is given in the New Testament (I am speaking of that specific doctrine now which has to do with church order) to check, to arrest disorder.

To Timothy, it is "...how men ought to behave themselves in the house of God" (1 Tim. 3:15). Then you look to see what the context has to say, and it is on numerous points checking disorders, putting things right. If it is Corinth, well, the order that is prescribed in Corinth, is because things have gone all wrong. If things are in health spiritually, the order will be quite all right. It will develop spontaneously in order. What we have got to look to is spiritual health, not the system, not the exact technique, not the exact order, not every detail. The best way of getting a perfect order is to have spiritual life at high level. You are dealing with a body, an organism. Get this body into health and you will see that it works all right, it works together all right, the relationships of its different faculties harmonize.

There is a system of medical science which has to do with the provision of a 'constitutional', that is, something that just fits that constitution. If you can touch the constitution, all the other things, the symptoms, right themselves. This principle of dealing with things does not go to the particular malady at once. You may have headache, all sorts of things which are local. The man who deals with this order of things says, 'We will leave that. We will get to the constitutional.' And he finds out what your constitution is and he gives you a constitutional remedy, and you find all other

things begin to right themselves. I am not saying that is infallible, but it is a sound principle. At any rate, it is sound in the Body of Christ. Get the constitutional right, that is, get the life system right, get the basis right, and these other things will right themselves.

You are dealing with a Body. You can never put things right by bringing in a technique, a system of teaching. While the Lord would instruct us about His Body and make us alive to what the Body is and what the Body means and how the Body functions, He would make us understand this, that we can never make it function like that by an outward imposition of a system, however perfect. He has not given us that, but says, 'The principle is Christ; the law is Christ. Let Christ be Head, let Christ be Lord, let Christ be everything, and you will not have any disorders. You will find everything goes right and moves according to the Divine mind.' The key is life, the key is Christ.

For what is the church? It is Christ's Body, and Christ's Body must be in health, it can be and it will be in health, if Christ its life is pre-eminent. So I see Paul when he comes to deal with the worst example of disorder we have on record, take two lines. Firstly, "I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). What is needed at Corinth or at any place where disorder is found in a local church is the application of the Cross, first of all to get that other centre of domination out of the way, and let Christ be Lord. Then Paul says, "We preach... Christ Jesus as Lord" (2 Cor. 4:5). The Lordship of Jesus Christ is the cure for everything, the secret of everything.

Let us be careful where we start. We do not begin with the church or preach the matter of the church with a perfect system or order. We come to the church on the basis of Christ, only Christ, and if only Christ had sway and dominion in every member of His Body, the order would be spontaneous and we should not need to have anything brought to us to tell us that this is wrong, this is disorder. Oh, it is the Lord Himself! Life and health is the result of the pre-eminence of our Lord Jesus. So we have said the doctrine comes when things go wrong. The doctor is one who says, 'This is wrong, you must stop this and do this'. That is the doctor. Well, may the Lord save us from the doctor by the more glorious establishment of His own personal supremacy in our midst.

Do not let us get our eyes on things, whether they be the disorders in the church or what we think to be the perfect system in the Word of God. Let us get our eyes on the Lord, and other things will resolve themselves. We shall be doing the same thing, saying the same thing, if the Lord is Lord in every one of us.

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