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Email: info@austin-sparks.net

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The Meaning of Union With Christ

by T. Austin-Sparks

First published in "A Witness and A Testimony" magazine, May-Jun 1932, Vol. 10-3.

"If, then, ye were raised together with Christ, seek the things which are above, WHERE CHRIST IS, seated on the right hand of God." - Col. 3:1.

"WE BEHOLD HIM (Jesus) crowned with glory and honour." - Heb. 2:9.

"LOOKING OFF UNTO JESUS, the author and perfecter of our faith, who hath sat down AT THE RIGHT HAND OF THE THRONE OF GOD." - Heb. 12:2.

The Meaning of Christ's Presence on Earth

The presence of Christ here on earth had two purposes. One was that there might be a perfect presentation of God to man. The other was that He might take up man according to God's thoughts. There were very few, if any, who saw Him in the first aspect. "The world knew Him not." Even those who were most closely and continuously in touch with Him, looking on Him, hearing Him, watching Him, did not really see Him. Toward the end He had to say to one of them, "Have I been so long time with you and yet hast thou not known me? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." But in that true sense they had not seen Him. He was here to personally represent the mind, heart, and will of God, but it needs the Holy Spirit to open the eyes to Christ in these respects. Nevertheless, God has had a perfect representation of Himself here on the earth, and thenceforth all knowledge of Him is inseparably bound up with the person of Jesus Christ. In a sense, of old time, the Jews went directly

to Jehovah, the first Person in the Godhead. They did not look upon the sacrifices, priesthood, etc., as more than things. That is, they did not personify these, and regard them in the light of a mediating Person. But from the time that Christ came into this world, entered upon His ministry, and accomplished His work in the Cross, God could never be known apart from Him, and in the most direct sense His words are true, "No man cometh unto the Father but by me." No Jew from that time would or will ever know God apart from Christ. When the name "Jehovah" went out of the Jewish Temple - as it did - it entered in the form of "Jesus" (Jehovah-Saviour) into the Christian Church. This first aspect of Christ's presence here is, however, not the object of our present consideration. We are here concerned with the other side in particular, although they cannot be separated. Christ was here to take up man as to God's thoughts about man. In Christ God had a man wholly according to His thought. (In what we are saying about Christ as man, we are not touching His deity, or overlooking the fact that Christ *was* God. That we believe absolutely, and about it we have no reservations. We are here dealing with His humanity.)

One of the main purposes why Christ spent some years here was that as man He should be tried, tested, proved by every kind of fiery ordeal as to His faithfulness, obedience, and devotion to God. The meal offering of Leviticus 2 is Christ's humanity, as is well known. That meal offering was prepared for presentation by fire in three ways. The oven, the pan open at the top, or the flat pan. The oven speaks of the fiery ordeal in secret where no life could see. The second method suggests those trials which only those who are sympathetic enough to look into can see. The flat pan is the form and nature of suffering and trial which is patent and open to all. In all of these ways the Lord Jesus was "made perfect through sufferings" and "tempted in all points like as we, yet without sin." He was tried by every realm. He met hell directly through its head - Satan himself tempted Him - and exhausted its resource to break His faithfulness and loyalty to His Father. During forty days in the wilderness He was thus directly assailed. It was but "for a season" that the Devil left Him then, and doubtless He had many another secret - oven-like - conflict with the "Prince of this World" over the matter of faith and obedience.

The world assailed Him. The world system, religious and pagan, circumstances, relatives, friends (?) and the commercial, social and professional realms all tried Him out. Even within the narrow circle of His own earthly home, not excluding the beloved and devoted mother, was His relationship to His heavenly Father put to the test.

Then, at length, in one terrible moment, heaven was the source of the supreme test. The Father had to forsake Him, and this broke His heart. Nevertheless, He triumphed, and almost immediately after the terrible cry of forsakenness He cried "FATHER, into Thy hands I commit my spirit." Thus He was tested and triumphant in every realm - heaven, earth, and hell; and in every form of trial. Thus He, as the "Captain" - file-leader - of our salvation was "made perfect, through sufferings."

This brings us to the point where we are able to answer the question as to why the Lord Jesus is as "Son of Man" in heaven: for it was "the Son of Man" whom Stephen saw standing on the right hand of God. It was "Jesus of Nazareth" who spoke and appeared to Saul of Tarsus. It is "Jesus" whom the Apostle says "we see crowned with glory and honour" and to Whom we are to "look off." It is "One like unto the Son of Man" who is repeatedly seen in the Book of Revelation. The truth, then, is that at God's right hand in the Person of His Son there is a MAN wholly according to His thoughts concerning man. God has got in His presence in the place of honour and power (right hand) a MAN who wholly satisfies Him and answers to all His eternal mind as to man. There is a humanity in God's presence with which He can be in the most perfect fellowship. Now, this is the whole foundation of

Christianity, provided it is borne in mind what this includes and involves as to the meaning of His Cross.

Everything in God's interest is bound up with Christ at God's right hand. This we shall see from several points of view or by taking its various inclusions. The first main truth in this apprehension of Christ is that Christ in heaven is

The Pattern to which God is Working

in all them that believe.

We are not here saying much about the *positional* meaning of Christ in glory, but are chiefly concerned with the *conditional* aspect. It is blessedly and wonderfully true that He is there as us, and that when we are "in Christ Jesus" all that is true of Him there is placed to the good of those who believe, and they are "accepted in the Beloved One." All that that means is a comprehensive revelation of the grace of God and should never cease to be the believer's theme of praise and ground of confidence.

But it is true that what obtains in Christ there *for us* is the Father's concern to make good *in us*. The all-inclusive statement concerning this matter, and which leads right on to the end is Romans 8:29: "*Whom He foreknew, He also foreordained to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the firstborn among many brethren.*"

God's object, then, is to have a family fully brought to the image of the Son who is at His right hand. That object sets the bounds to the interest of God. All His interest is bound up with that, and He has no interest outside of that. Christ is "the Alpha and Omega, the First and the Last" the beginning and the ending.

How will God operate unto that end? Here, again, we are on what is - although elementary, yet - most vital. He will do it inwardly and from within. The only but sure hope of glory is "Christ in you."

What is the New Birth?

This postulates the absolute necessity of the new birth. What is the new birth, simply? It is receiving Christ as the Life into the heart by faith. Not life as a thing, in the abstract, but life in inseparable relation to the Person. This is emphatically so on the ground that the Holy Spirit is a Person: He is the "Spirit of Christ," and He is the "Spirit of Life," and there is no relationship to Christ apart from the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ he is none of his" (Rom. 8:9).

So, then, Christ, the Holy Spirit, and "Eternal Life" are one as to the basis and resultant relationship to Him. Christ is the Object and Central Reality. The Holy Spirit is the Divine Agent. Eternal Life is the basis of relationship to God.

Whatever terms we may use, whether "New Birth," being "Born anew," "Born from above," "Regeneration," or "Born of God," the meaning is one, and it is that we receive in Christ by the Holy Spirit the life of that One Who is at God's right hand. Nothing is possible of conformity to His image until that life has been put within us. As in a newly born infant the life contains all the elements,

possibilities and potentialities of the fully grown man to be, so in new birth all that Christ is as "made perfect" is in the life of His Spirit then imparted.

By nature *that* life is not in anyone, it is the "gift of God" in new birth, regeneration by the Holy Spirit. It is upon that new life within that all God's interests are centred. The growth, increase, and development of that life with all its features is the one purpose of the Holy Spirit in the believer. Paul wrote to certain believers - "my little children for whom I travail in birth until Christ be fully formed in you." Christ fully formed within; that is the nature of spiritual growth.

The new birth is the beginning and provides the Holy Spirit with His basis. That is the first step in answering the question as to the nature of union with Christ. It is oneness with Him in His risen and enthroned life. That is life which is already *in Him* consummated in full triumph.

The second thing in this union on the side of state is sanctification.

What is Sanctification?

This great doctrine can be quite adequately brought within the compass of two simple statements for our purpose here.

Sanctification is firstly an act and that an act of making the object wholly the Lord's. In Old Testament times when a thing or a person was sanctified (consecrated, devoted, sanctified; all same word) it or he was first taken apart and separated from all other interests and made wholly the Lord's. From that time all the proprietary rights were His, and it was recognised that He had the entire claim upon it and government of it. It was consecrated or sanctified by blood or that which had the same symbolic significance. This is the simple fundamental meaning of sanctification.

"Ye are not your own, ye were bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:20).

"Ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold but with precious blood" (1 Peter 1:18).

It is - in an act - presenting spirit, soul, and body to the Lord that in every part and in all the details of life He shall have first and final consideration: be consulted on all matters of mind, heart, and will; the personal life with the entire self principle and natural constitution handed up by the Cross to be absolutely subject to the will of God. Christ at the right hand of God represents man as in an act abandoned to the will of God; tried as to that abandonment in every way; and victorious as to that initial act. That act has to be entered into by the believer, and maintained in the energy of the Holy Spirit to the end.

There is abiding virtue and power in His act "once for all" for us in our receiving of His Spirit.

Then, secondly, sanctification is a progressive thing. It is the process by which all that is true of the moral excellencies of His glorified humanity is wrought in the believer. The things of Christ, taken by the Holy Spirit and revealed to His own are not just the splendours and riches and possessions which He has entered into for Himself. Neither are they just *things* gained as a reward. They are those perfections through sufferings which are to be made over to believers, and into which believers are to be brought that they may also share the glory which rests upon perfected humanity as its native state as invested by an all satisfied and delighted God.

As "we behold Him we are changed from one degree of glory to another, as by the Lord the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18).

This beholding is by the Spirit's revealing *inwardly*, and what is revealed is the truth of Christ as "made unto us sanctification," that is, sanctification *for* us and *in* us.

I see, by the Spirit that sanctification is not my struggling and striving to be better. It is the fruit of Christ's conflict and victory appropriated by faith. It is not my moral improvement by effort or care, but the appreciation and apprehension of Christ's moral perfections as secured for me. Christ in glory is the pattern in the eye of the Holy Spirit, and He would work in me conformity to that pattern, asking of me yieldedness, surrender, faith, obedience; unto all of which He is willing to be my strength as I take an attitude of a positive character in line with His purpose, as over against a mere passivity of mind.

Why We are Chastened

Thus sanctification is the meaning of "Christ at the right hand of God" and of our union with Him in the Spirit. What is true of the New Birth as the basis, and of Sanctification as the all-inclusive process, explains the dealings of God with us in training. We must be careful that we do not fall into the snare of thinking of God as ever standing over us with a stick, ready to pounce upon our faults and immediately punish us. "Chastening," as in Hebrews 12 is not just punishment, it is "child-training." True it represents suffering in the main. But then there are those of us who, now we are of matured judgment, justify parents up to the hilt for the chastening which, when it was given, was regarded as cruel and unloving. We wonder what we should be but for it, and those of us who are parents have long since changed our thoughts about many of the unpleasant experiences of childhood. We may smart under any little bit of injustice which clings so tenaciously to memory, but we are not now in the hands of an unjust or unrighteous Father.

God is after an "afterward." What is it? "The peaceable fruits of righteousness." That is, a *state* where there is no discord or strain in relationships. This is nothing other than Christ's present state with the Father being made good in us also. So all the difficult aspects of our training are to the same end - conformity to His image.

The Motive of Ministry

There is one other aspect of this matter to which we will point before we close. It is in relation to ministry and fellowship. What should be the predominant motive and aim of ministry, whether to us or through us? It most certainly should be with God's one end in view, and everything should be sacrificed for, or brought into line with that. God's one end is likeness to His Son. In ministry everything must be subjected to the test as to how far it is calculated to reach that end. With God Himself the value of anything and everything is determined by this. Methods, materials, manner, personal presence, and everything are to come under this test. Only the Holy Spirit can bring to Christ and conform to Christ. Hence ministry is of value according as it is in the Holy Spirit. Not only does this apply to our ministry, but it must influence us in the matter of what we accept and where we go.

Are we being built up in Christ? Does what we receive really tend to inwardly increase Him? Is it Christ being ministered to us in the Holy Spirit? If not, then no matter how interesting, brilliant,

informing, or attractive, we are wasting our time, the eternal thing is not being done, and God's end is being missed. This principle must also apply to the fellowship of believers. It is so easy to fall into the trap of talking on all sorts of commonplaces, matters of interest, and often into a spiritually dissipating jocularity and frivolity, and then when the time is gone to realise that the heart cries out in hunger for that which alone is its Bread - even Christ. Fellowship should be unto mutual upbuilding and definitely to impart Christ to one another.

Hebron was where they made David King and feasted for days in happy fellowship. Fellowship should always be the festivity of the crowned - exalted - glorified Lord, and more of Himself in our heart should be the outcome.

Thus we see that everything in the life of the believer from the beginning is related directly and in a practical way with Christ in glory, and the nature of union with Christ is that of the Holy Spirit's activities unto our conformity to His image, individually and corporately.