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The Way

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"But Saul, yet breathing threatening and slaughter against the disciples of the Lord, went unto the high priest, and asked of him letters to Damascus unto the synagogues, that if he found any that were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem" (Acts 9:1,2).

"But when some were hardened and disobedient, speaking evil of the Way before the multitude, he departed from them" (Acts 19:9).

"And about that time there arose no small stir concerning the Way" (Acts 19:23).

"I persecuted this Way unto the death, binding and delivering into prisons both men and women" (Acts 22:4).

"But this I confess unto thee, that after the Way which they call a sect, so serve I the God of our fathers, believing all things which are according to the law, and which are written in the prophets" (Acts 24:14).

"But Felix, having more exact knowledge concerning the Way, deferred..." (Acts 24:22).

"The same following after Paul and us cried out, saying, These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim unto you the Way of salvation" (Acts 16:17).

"This man had been instructed in the Way of the Lord; and being fervent in spirit, he spake and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, knowing only the baptism of John: and he began to speak boldly in the synagogue. But when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him unto them, and expounded unto him the Way of God more accurately" (Acts 18:25,26).

"Enter ye in by the narrow gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many are they that enter in thereby. For narrow is the gate, and straitened the Way, that leadeth unto life, and few are they that find it" (Matt. 7:13,14).

It is very interesting, to say the least of it, to recognize that in New Testament times the Christian life and walk became resolved into a term like this, to be spoken of as "THE WAY." It would seem strange in our ears, no doubt, if we heard people talking about us as "the People of the Way," but that is evidently how it was then, and it would be interesting to know just how that came about; and I think we shall not be very far wrong if we come to an opinion about it. Evidently people in those days were very much like people today. They were given to summing things up in a terse, brief manner, and affixing labels.

You see, the very word "Christian" was their way of summing it all up. At times we have that word mentioned. "The disciples were called Christians first in Antioch" (Acts 11:26). Then the Apostle says, "If a man suffer as a Christian..." (1 Pet. 4:16). Clearly, it was outsiders who gave believers that name, and, as we know, it simply means '*Christ-ones*,' and it was shortened into Christians; it was the world who coined that title for believers in the Lord Jesus. 'They are Christ-ians!'

Evidently it was something like that that resulted in Christianity becoming known as the Way, but it was apparently the result of something they were always saying. They, or at least the chief men among the Apostles at the beginning - Peter, James, John - had heard the Lord Jesus say, "I AM THE WAY... no one cometh unto the Father but by Me" (John 14:6); and they had gone out preaching to the world and proclaiming that Jesus was the Way and that there was no other way. So people had taken it up and said, These are the people of the Way. What an admission! Whether or not they meant it as a slight and said it with a sneer, what a lot there is in it for truth! 'These *Christ-ones* are the people of *the Way*.' And in both cases, whether it is *Christ-ones* or the Way, the result is that it is all bound up with, and inseparable from, the Lord Jesus. If we are right in surmising that that is where the phrase comes from - "I AM THE WAY," and these men had preached Jesus as the Way - then it comes right back to that - *Christ-ones*, people of Him WHO IS THE WAY; that is, not people who just have a way of their own, who take a way different from others, but people of a Person Who is the Way. It is the Person Who gives character to the Way. It is the Person Who makes the Way, it is the Person Who has pioneered that Way and blazed that trail. They are in the Way of the Person.

And do you not think that is probably why the Devil hated it so much? It is strange how many ways people can take with seeming success and without very much trouble. Think of all the ways that people take today, even religiously. You cannot cope with all the fantastic courses that people adopt. They go all their strange, peculiar ways - ways that you think no commonsense person would ever look at - but they go and they get crowds to follow them; and nobody bothers to oppose them. But here it is different. We come to that in a minute.

We are not going to say a great deal about the Way - what it came to mean so far as the Church and believers were concerned. We just look right on the surface of it, at one or two things that are very simple.

An Exclusive Way

First of all, seeing that it was the Way which was that of a Person, and not just a system of truth and doctrine, it was a very exclusive Way. There is a sense in which we can use that word safely and rightly. I think it was to that that the Lord referred when He said, "Narrow is the gate, and straitened the way, that leadeth unto life, and few are they that find it." It is a very exclusive way. The Lord has an illustration for that, the illustration of the camel and the needle's eye, the name for the little gate at the side of the main entrance to the city. A merchant has arrived with his camel after sundown, and the gates are closed always at dusk. Somehow he has to get in with his camel, and so, after a good deal of argument, the porter says, Well, if you can get your camel through that lych gate, you may come in, but I must not open the main gate. So the man strips his camel of everything - everything comes off and is left outside. Then he tells his camel to go down, and the man tugs and squeezes the camel through. The camel is stripped of everything and he is right down as low as he can get.

Here the illustration about the Way means this. There are a lot of things that cannot come in, and you will never get in if you try to bring those things with you. You will be stripped of everything of your old world and your old life if you are coming into the Way. Was it not that that caused the offence to the man known as the rich young ruler? "Go, sell that which thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow Me" (Matt. 19:21). He went away grieved, for he had great possessions. It was simply the test of the "needle's eye," and he could not stand up to it. It is an exclusive way, and the Lord never hid the fact from anybody who was coming after Him. Except this and that and that, He said, ye cannot be My disciples. Yes, it is narrow. Well, that is only the world's view of it. That is what the world says about the Christian way, the Christian life - it is "narrow." That is how it is viewed from outside. They call Christians narrow-minded. Have we found the life narrow? Well, yes, lots of things have gone, but when you have got inside, what have you found? It is only narrow from that outside standpoint. It ought not to be narrow inside. We have missed something if the Christian life is a narrow, mean, poor, thin thing. We have missed its meaning. Oh, what a vastness, what a wealth, what a fulness we have entered into!

An Inclusive Way

Yes, it is exclusive in a sense, but it is inclusive in the Divine sense, from heaven's standpoint. It is tremendous for those who really become children of the Way. While it was exclusive at a certain point, the entering of the gate, it has become inclusive when you are inside. The Lord really is not a debtor to any man. "Every one that hath left houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or children, or lands, for My Name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold" (Matt. 19:29). I ask you, with all that it means on the side of difficulty and trial to be in the Way, would you go back to the other way, would you leave this Way? If you really would, well, I do not know what has happened to you. You really have not come to know the meaning of being in the Way, for it is a large, a full, a wealthy place. Oh yes, we do know all the testing, we do know what a lot has had to go; but oh, we would think more than twice before exchanging our present lot for the lot of those outside of the Way. Have we not had to sit down sometimes when things were getting a bit too much for us and the pressure was tempting us to think back - have we not sat down and said, Can I go back? Can I exchange this for the old life that I left? And every time it has been No, oh no! We cannot do it, it is unthinkable. There is in the Way, after all, a wonderful fulness. It is not all loss, there is a great deal of gain. The Thessalonians were people of the Way, they suffered the loss of all things; but read again the opening chapters of the two letters, and hear the Apostle speaking about the overflowing

joy and the overflowing love which was amongst them. They suffered joyfully the spoiling of their goods. Why? Well, not just for the pleasure of being very Spartan, and enduring a lot of suffering for the sake of showing what tremendous grit they had. No! They found in the Way a greater compensation for all their loss.

A Contested Way

But, saying that, there is no doubt about it, it is a contested way. Strangely, all the passages in which the phrase occurs are passages relating to opposition. Paul is saying that he persecuted the Way, and the first mention of the Way is in connection with his persecuting. "...that if he found any that were of the Way, whether men or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem." He did not carry it out in Damascus, but he says later that he used to do that (Acts 22:4) - he threw men and women, bound, into prisons (note the plural). He had been on some other expeditions wherever he could track the Way. Several passages speak of how the Way was contested - as we said earlier, not simply because it was a new doctrine but because of WHO THE WAY WAS. You can be a Christian of sorts, you can bear the name of a Christian, you can have a kind of profession of Christianity and not know any of the persecution. It is the temptation of many to try and be Christians but to avoid the persecution bound up with it, and there are today a lot of Christians, so-called, who are not in the fight of the Way. They are evading it by some means, they are hiding what they are, they are not coming out into the open with it; but here you notice it was when the Way was out in the open it was so challenged, antagonized, contested.

They were proclaiming JESUS AS THE WAY, and so they met the antagonism of the prince of this world through his subjects; and if we are really going to be true to the Way, which is only saying to be true to the Lord - to be loyal to our Master, not to hide where we stand, let it be out in the open - well, we are going to meet the conflict. We had better make up our minds about it. But there is our opportunity, and there is the Lord's opportunity, and it works good all round. It makes for tremendous spiritual increase and growth. You look for the people who have grown spiritually and become strong, and you find that they are the people who have let it be known Whose they are and Whom they serve, and they have accepted the consequences of open and positive antagonism. They are the people who have grown. Look for the people who are small and weak spiritually, and you will find they are the people who are not right out in the open with their testimony. It works for our own spiritual increase and strengthening - the Lord sees to that. Then it gives the Lord the opportunity of finding out where there are those who are wanting the Way. There are a lot wanting the Way, but they will not find it until there is a lamp that shows the Way; and "Ye are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14). If the Lord has us in a clear, open place, it gives Him the opportunity of discovering and getting hold of those who will come into the Way. That is gain. So it is so necessary for us to be right out in the open, letting it be known that we are of the Way - taking the consequences, but to very great gain all round. Yes, it is a contested way.

The Entrance To The Way

What is the entrance to the Way? How do we get into the Way? What is the gateway? It is the Cross and what the Cross means. It is there that the laying down of our lives with Christ takes place; it is there that the stripping of this world from us takes place; it is there that the all-inclusive meaning of the Way is faced and accepted. The Cross stands there and no one gets into the Way except by that Cross and what it means. If we want not only to get into the Way but to make good progress in the Way - not all the time to be coming to a halt, then getting on a little and another halt, making very

jerky and irregular progress which is most unsatisfactory - if we want not only to get in but to go on and keep on going on, then let us recognize the fulness of the meaning of that Cross, that in that Way all questions are settled as to who is going to be Master and Lord. This is what the Lord was suggesting in principle when He said that if the Master treads the way, the servant must tread it too (John 15:20). We have it in a hymn - "It is the way the Master went, should not the servant tread it still?" But He introduced that suggestion. 'I have gone this way, the way of an utterness of letting go. Satan offered Me all the kingdoms of this world and the glory thereof as a gift outright, and I said, No! Satan will never offer that to you, he will only offer it to you in bits, fragments; he offered the whole to Christ. The Lord said, No, not a bit of it on your terms! He accepted the way of the Cross wholly and utterly. Well, you see what happened.

It was not at all necessary for Him, for Himself, to go to the Cross. He was glorified on the Mount of Transfiguration. For Himself He could have gone right through at once. He only went through the Cross for us, not for Himself. The Cross means that this world is ruled out, set aside, and all its prizes, and its tinsel, its so-called glories, have nothing for us, we are utterly for the Lord. We are here on this earth, in this world, for the Lord, cost what it may in this life. Well, that is both the way in and the way on. If we are pausing, to count the cost and to discuss the terms: if we are like those disciples before they came to the place where the Cross to them was not the loss of all things but the gaining of all things: if we are saying, as one did, "Lo, we have left all, and followed Thee; what then shall we have?" (Matt. 19:27): if there is anything of that we shall not get on very far. "What shall we have?" Rather must it be, when we have done all - "We are unprofitable servants" (Luke 17:10). Really, the Lord has not got very much out of us when we have done all. Well, the gate is the Cross, and it is just in the measure in which we accept what the Cross represents that we shall go on in the Way - and that is only saying in figurative language that only in that measure shall we come to the appreciation of the fulness of Christ, make spiritual progress and be of real value to Him as pioneers in the Way for others to come on. "Those of the Way." Well, with all the cost and with all the contesting, may the Lord give us that glorying in our hearts - after all, we are people of the Way.