

**T. Austin-Sparks:****Chapter 2 - The Continuous Controversy and Conflict**

It is a matter of very simple evidence and observation that the first three chapters of the Bible have not been passed before all the elements of conflict and controversy are met with. And from then onward, right through the Bible, those elements of conflict and controversy are rarely absent. The Book is just full of them, until we reach the last two chapters; and the conflict ceases, the controversy is settled, and that, forever. But, as we pointed out in our first chapter, the center of the consummation, the final issue, the end which has been the occasion of this tremendous conflict from the beginning, is this: "The tabernacle of God is with men, and He shall dwell with them, and they shall be His peoples, and God Himself shall be... their God" (Rev 21:3).

When we look closer into this matter, it is most impressive to find that it is invariably related to and focused upon one thing: namely, God's place in this world, and particularly upon a people for His habitation. It is that which is, as we say, the bone of contention, the focal point of all the trouble. That is the issue there in the garden at the beginning, with the first pair. It is far too beautiful and happy a scene - for one exalted being - to behold God walking and talking with men, having blessed fellowship with men, in a scene of peace and rest and order - that is far too beautiful a thing to allow to go unassailed. Somehow, a situation must be set up, which will break in upon that fellowship, if possible end it, or at least suspend it, and drive God out. That was the issue then - God present here in conditions of fellowship with men. Many things may circle round that, but that is the point of the trouble in the first family. A family in holy and sacred fellowship with God is something that will not go unassailed. And so we find the family thrown into this state of conflict, and one brother murders the other.

It is the whole point in the history of the chosen nation, in all its varied phases and stages. It was the point when that chosen nation was in Egypt. What was it that God intended? It is found in His challenge to Pharaoh, king of Egypt: "Let My people go, that they may serve Me" (Ex 7:16 etc). We know from later history what that meant - God in the midst of a people. And the great controversy and conflict in Egypt was born of the realization, on the part of sinister powers, that, if that happens, God will have what He has ever set His heart upon having, and that must be frustrated at all costs. God gets the children of Israel out into the wilderness, to be His people, for His dwelling-place; but, as they are in the wilderness, congregated at the foot of the mountain, and Moses goes up into the mountain, what happens? Note, Moses is going to receive the pattern of the Tabernacle, in which God will take up residence in the midst of His people, and for that Tabernacle there will be the need of some gold in the great symbolism of the Divine nature; and that gold has been brought out of Egypt. While Moses tarries in the mount, what happens? Once again, there enters in this challenge to the Divine purpose, and the gold is stolen from God and made into a calf, to be worshipped in the very place of God!

It is all a part of the one long story. And it goes on in their history, when they are through the wilderness and in the land. Solomon builds the Temple, and God takes up His residence. But just before that temple was going to be brought in and built, another terrible thing happened. It is said, "And Satan stood up against Israel, and moved David to number Israel" (1 Chron 21:1). We know the story. The numbering, of course, was just a bit of vanity - the vanity of the human heart; 'counting heads'; being able to say, 'What a great people I have, and what a great king I am!' Even a man of the world who had very little, if any, spiritual perception - Joab - saw through it and urged the king not to do it. But he insisted, and then He had to reckon with God. The result - the devastation of the nation; till at last, as the plague swept over the people, mowing them down, the Angel of the Lord met David at the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite - and that became the site of the Temple.

What a contesting, what a controversy all the time over this 'habitation of God'! The Temple is built and then, when the nation has come to the very summit, in the realization of a habitation for God, the builder of the Temple himself defaults, and makes an alliance with that which is another god, outside of Israel. And so it is not long before the nation is split in two. The downward movement rapidly gathers momentum, and the Lord leaves the Temple. The end of that movement is away into Babylon: the Temple, Jerusalem, forsaken of God; a people in captivity. After seventy years a remnant returns and commences to rebuild a temple. The story is told in the twin books of Ezra and Nehemiah - and what books of conflict they are. Here it is again; it is as though something or someone has said: "No, never, if we can stop it!" And indeed they were partly successful, for at one point we read "Then ceased the work of the house of God..." (Ezra 4:24).

In this atmosphere of conflict and controversy the Old Testament closes. As the New Testament opens, as we saw in our first chapter, God comes to His consummate realization along two lines. Firstly, He becomes incarnate in His Son as 'Immanuel' - 'God with us'. But His very presence raises the bitterest controversy, on this very point of the Temple. It all centers in and circles round this Temple. You remember the charge which brought Him to His death; it was: 'He spoke about the destruction of the temple!' He said: "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it again" (John 2:19). In their blindness to His true spiritual meaning, they interpreted it as meaning that the great Temple in Jerusalem was to be destroyed. Of course it was! But those words of His brought Him to His death. A few years later Stephen took up this matter, and, in words that are almost an echo of Solomon's declared: "The Most High dwelleth not in temples made with hands" (Acts 7:48) and those words unloosed upon him a storm of rage and fury. That was the focal point of it all, and it is most significant. And finally, when the personal Christ, having been sown like a grain of wheat in the ground, and having died, has risen in the corporate form of the nucleus of His Church, to form the 'habitation of God' in reality, what a storm breaks upon it! It is the signal for new outbreaks of this same terrible antagonism.

### The Tragic History of Divisions

That is at the root of all the sad, tragic history through the centuries, of divisions and schisms, conflicts, contentions and controversies, amongst Christians. The one determination is - God is not going to have this dwelling, if it can be prevented by any means whatsoever; this must be stopped! For there is no greater menace to the kingdom of darkness than a people after this kind: a people to which God commits Himself, because they provide Him with a ground for being there - just being there in blessed fellowship. We believe that we are living in the 'end times'; and, as the end draws near, in spite of all the talk and efforts for unions and affiliations, and so on, the spirit of suspicion and fear and misunderstanding only intensifies. The atmosphere of Christianity is impregnated with it, until it seems that the last little thing will suffer division if possible. The differences are multiplying all the time.

Why are there so many differences and controversies in the realm of interpretations and of Christian relationships? It is this one thing. You may say it is because of this or that or the other thing; you may put it down to one of the many hundreds of things that make for division, but let us get right to the heart and root of the matter. Every one of these things which may be the pretext is related to this one true reason, which is all-inclusive and all-governing: namely a spiritual-relatedness of the people of God, to provide Him with that which has been in His heart from all eternity - a habitation, a presencing of Himself with men. That is the heart of it. All this sad and terrible history and story is related to this corporate idea - in the beginning, the man and his wife; then two brothers; next the race, twelve brothers who became twelve tribes; the pattern of the Tabernacle, and so on. There has always been an inexorable determination, either to prevent it, or wreck it, if it has any semblance of being present. Ever and always the point of attack has been the people of God in heavenly fellowship, with God in their midst.

It is thus perfectly evident that there exists in this universe a force and system that is bitterly antagonistic to the realization of this Divine purpose. This phenomenon is not a 'natural' thing. True, there often seem to be good human and natural reasons for it. But get behind all that, and you find that it is all issuing from this realm, or hierarchy, which is antagonistic to this one thing.

And it is this one thing. We speak about the 'Church militant': what do we mean by the Church militant? Well, our ideas are usually objective when we speak like that. We think of the Church making assault upon heathenism, upon paganism, upon worldliness, upon vice, upon bad social conditions, upon suffering and its causes. This is perhaps what we mean by the Church 'militant', but however true and right that may be, the fact is that the Church 'militant' finds its campaign sabotaged from the inside - it is defeated before it even starts to fight. It cannot fight as a corporate whole, because it is already crippled from within by the lack of expression of this one, related, corporate life. Yes, the enemy has subtly got inside things, and has weakened and paralyzed the Church 'militant'.

You are perhaps familiar with the story in the life of Spurgeon. The students of his college were preaching their 'trial' sermon before him and one young man chose Ephesians 6 for his subject. In a great attempt at eloquence and impressiveness, he pictured the warrior, and the armour, and himself as taking it up; and at last, fully clad, in great boldness he stepped forward and cried: "Now, where is the enemy?" Mr. Spurgeon, sitting in the audience, cupped his hands and called out: "Inside the armour!"

That story is very much to the point. The Church is not moving 'like a mighty army' - it is not true that -

**'Like a mighty army moves the church of God!'**

It is not true that it is "terrible as an army with banners" (Song of Solomon 6:4,10). Satan has seen to that; he has given the lie to that. What is the point? We have got to take account of something more than the human factors and the natural elements. I am not wanting to open the door to any morbid occupation with demonism, but perhaps in our fears we have swung too much the other way. We must either accept the Bible or reject it; and if we accept the Bible as it stands, we have got to accept the fact of a great, evil, spiritual system that is unrelenting, ceaseless in vigilance and activity, watching for any and every opportunity and ground that it can use against this one thing - the absolute oneness of God's people, to provide Him with a habitation suitable to Himself. We have got to recognize that great system, and definitely take it into account.

### **Numbness to the Real Cause**

There seems to be some strange dullness, numbness, over the Church in this matter - a fact which in itself may be significant. What Christian, for instance, does not know Ephesians chapter 6? Probably most of us could quote it: "For our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places" (Eph 6:12). Who does not know that, as to the words, the language? But, who has really been stung into the realization of what that means for the Church - into the recognition of the fact that that word is the summing up of the greatest revelation of that Church which has ever been given to mankind? It is up to that that the apostle moves, with his great unveiling of the Church, in its past, eternal election, in its heavenly vocation, in its walk here with God and in its coming eternity of purpose. Through all that, he moves up to this, and says: Yes - but, while that is true, while that is God's masterpiece, the greatest thing ever conceived, it is at the same time the one object of the inimical, antagonistic interest and attention of countless hosts of evil spirits. The 'principalities and powers', the 'world rulers of this darkness', the 'hosts of wicked spirits', all have one thing that they are after, namely, the destruction of that Church, the dividing of that Church. We, I say, are strangely numb in the face of such a revelation: we are not stung alive to the recognition of what it means.

If all of this is true - and you will have very great difficulty in arguing your way out of this, if you are so disposed, for, as I say, the Bible, from the first chapters to the last, is full of this controversy and conflict, over the matter of God having a habitation for Himself, in a people - if this is true, we need to adjust ourselves, take a new attitude, and face the fact that these evil forces are merely concerned with the grand sum-total of the Church, to split it into so many sections, but that they will not stop at the last two individual Christians! They began with the first two, and they will pursue their evil purpose to get in between and separate the last two believers.

That being so, we have got to adjust ourselves to the further fact that any division, any breaking up of fellowship, is not to be put down finally to some human or natural factors. They may be the immediate pretext or the occasion, but behind, there is something very much more. We are involved in a terrible warfare over this matter of relatedness - far, far, beyond our power of overcoming or coping with it. And there is where the words in this great letter come to our rescue, as the apostle prays that the Father would "grant you... that ye may be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inward man". "Now unto Him Who is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us, unto Him be the glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus, unto all ages, forever and ever" (Eph 3:16,20,21). Yes, we must take account of these forces, and adjust ourselves to the matter in a new way. We need to realize what it is that is happening, not putting everything down to secondary causes, but getting behind them to the primary course in that other, evil, realm.

God is holy: the place of His dwelling must be holy. If this dividing is the work of Satan, then it is unholy. The touch of evil means that God cannot commit Himself to that which divides Him. Cried the apostle to the Corinthians: "Is Christ divided?" (1 Cor 1:13) And I think there was a tone of shock in his interrogation - it is unthinkable! Christ is not divided! Therefore He cannot commit Himself to division. The Holy Spirit is one Spirit: "There is," says the apostle, "one Spirit" (Eph 4:4). There are not as many Christs, as many Holy Spirits, as there are believers. We do not have a personal or private Jesus, or Holy Spirit. We only have Him and Them in common, and there is no other way of having the Lord.

### **The Key to Oneness**

Now we have got to find the key to this oneness, this unity. And in this very passage, the apostle speaks of it as "the unity of the Spirit" (Eph 4:3). The unity of the Spirit - therein lies the key. Our oneness, our unity, is not first an intellectual thing. It is not that, after threshing out truth and matters of procedure and after the great deal of

discussion and argument we have arrived at some measure of procedure, and a great deal of discussion and argument, we have arrived at some measure of agreement, and know we are one! It does not begin there; that is not the basis of our oneness at all. Even in evangelical truth, we do not arrive at oneness by argument, intellectually. We do not arrive at it by sharing in some enterprise, a common undertaking or piece of work - seeing something that needs to be done, and resolving to unite to do it. The history of Christian work is surely the history of how that kind of thing breaks down, does not go through, when it meets the forces of evil. No, we are not one in that way. We are not one by sentiment - by, (may I use the word) smarminess, nice talk, closing our eyes to wrong that is wrong; that is not a basis of oneness. It is not a oneness of ideals, and certainly not a oneness of pretense. What is it? It is, as the Word here says, the unity of the Spirit; that is, of the Holy Spirit. As I have just said, there are not as many Holy Spirits as there are believers. "In one Spirit we were all baptized into one Body" (1 Cor 12:13), says the Apostle.

This oneness is first of all basic, and then it is progressive. It is basic by our sharing of a common life. Oh, that we made more of that fundamental reality. We know it is true. Were we to be scattered over the world, meeting perhaps one Christian in a hundred thousand, we should find the thing becoming very, very real. What a grand thing it is - generally - to meet a Christian! You do not immediately raise ecclesiastical questions, doctrinal questions, and so on; you just find you have something in common. And if we only keep on that ground, what a long way we can go. We know a believer, a true believer, anywhere in the world, without introduction. The introduction is inside! It is something fundamental: we share one life; we have one Holy Spirit dwelling in all. That is the basic reality of oneness, if only we would make more of it.

And then the oneness is progressive: that is, it grows, it develops, it proceeds and progresses: by our living in the Spirit. It is ministered to by life in the Spirit, by a life governed by the Holy Spirit within us. Though this has been said many times, it is a point for very great emphasis: if only you and I, personally, really lived lives that were under the government of the Holy Spirit inside, what a big difference it would make! For He is the Spirit of truth; and if we as born-again children of God, indwelt by the Holy Spirit, knew Him governing our spirit and our inner-consciousness, supposing we had a false notion about some other child of God, it would not be long before we knew, in our own hearts, that the Holy Spirit did not agree with that notion. We hear something about somebody - a false report, a false rumour - and take it on. But reports that are apparently true, and that come from the most 'authentic' and most 'trustworthy' source, may yet be false; and we can know it in our own hearts by the Holy Spirit. And the governing of the Spirit will be a safe-guard against some division, some strain, some broken fellowship, which ought never to be, because it is founded upon a lie - it may be even a beautiful lie! We could spend much time with that.

Oneness - fellowship - is then progressive on the basis of a life in the Spirit. And you and I, as God's people, are called to live in the Spirit, to walk by the Spirit, to know the voice of the Spirit, the inner instruction and teaching of the Spirit. It takes us a long time to learn it in any great measure, but it is a great reality which ought to begin with our new birth - the consciousness of a new standard of values, of things that differ, of right and wrong, of what we ought to do and what we ought not to do, of how we ought to speak and how we ought not to speak - all this ought to be born with us at our new birth. And it ought to grow, and grow, and grow. Only so will this other evil kingdom be destroyed; only so will its works be countered; only so will the Church be "terrible as an army with banners". Only so will God find the place that He is seeking, where He can commit Himself and abide, and make Himself known.

There is a great battle on, and that battle is not just the battle of different conceptions and interpretations and presentations of Christianity. Behind all is the battle between a great intention of God, and the counter-intention of a great foe. May God help us to have our eyes opened to this, and to be very clear-cut as to where we stand in this fight.