

T. Austin-Sparks:

"Or are ye ignorant, brethren (for I speak to men who know the law), how that the law hath dominion over a man for so long time as he liveth? For the woman that hath a husband is bound by law to the husband while he liveth; but if the husband die, she is discharged from the law of the husband. So then if, while the husband liveth, she be joined to another man, she shall be called an adulteress: but if the husband die, she is free from the law, so that she is no adulteress, though she be joined to another man. Wherefore, my brethren, ye also were made dead to the law through the body of Christ; that ye should be joined to another, even to him who was raised from the dead, that we might bring forth fruit unto God" (Romans 7:1-4).

"For the husband is head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, being himself the saviour of the body... Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for it; that he might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word, that he might present the church to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. Even so ought husbands also to love their own wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his own wife loveth himself: for no man ever hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as Christ also the church; because we are members of his body. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the two shall become one flesh. This mystery is great; but I speak in regard of Christ and of the Church" (Ephesians 5:23, 25-32).

"Let us rejoice and be exceeding glad, and let us give the glory unto him: for the marriage of the Lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready" (Revelation 19:7).

"And there came one of the seven angels who had the seven bowls, who were laden with the seven last plagues; and he spake with me, saying, Come hither, I will show thee the bride, the wife of the Lamb" (Revelation 21:9).

"Behold, I and the children whom God hath given me" (Hebrews 2:13).

Legal and Spiritual Union

I expect you have noticed that there are two aspects, offices, of this particular union with Christ, the marital union. There is that which is mentioned by Paul in the letter to the Romans, and there is that which is mentioned by him in the letter to the Ephesians and by John in the Revelation. One puts the marriage as having already taken place, and the other puts it in the future; and that looks difficult. How are you going to explain it?

Well, in exactly the same way as a number of other things are explained in the New Testament, a number of other things which seem to be a contradiction. There is the initial marriage of Romans, and the final marriage of Ephesians and Revelation, and the difference is that the initial is the legal and the final is the spiritual, and, as we were saying in an earlier study in this series, in various things in the New Testament we have both an initial and a final aspect. We were speaking then of sonship. We are sons, and yet we are to be sons; legally, we are already sons, but we are presently to become such spiritually, in the sense of possessing the inheritance. "If sons, then heirs": we are legally heirs by our new birth, but we are certainly not in possession of our inheritance, not enjoying all that is our heritage in Christ. It will take much more than this life, it will take all the ages to come, for us really to possess, appropriate and enjoy our inheritance.

Salvation is spoken of in this very way. We are saved, but we are yet to be saved, we shall be saved - it is put in the future. But it is just as definitely in the present - we are being saved. A lot of people have made a lot of trouble over that sort of thing, and have said that, because there is a future-tense reference to salvation in the New Testament, you can never know whether you are saved until you get to heaven. Well, we do not believe that, because it is not our experience. We know we are saved, but we also know that we are to be saved, and it does not mean that there is something that has come in between to make us unsaved: it simply points to this difference, that we see in so many connections, between our standing and our state, between the legal and the spiritual.

Later on, we shall be speaking about the House of God. Well, we are a spiritual house now. It is in present-tense terms. But we read - "whose house are we, if we hold fast our boldness and the glorying of our hope firm unto the end" (Heb. 3:6). Again it looks as though we are thrown back, we have to undo something; but it is not like that at all.

Now here it is perhaps more distinctly seen, in this matter of the marriage relationship between the Church and Christ. Paul says in the Roman letter that we are married to another, "even to him who was raised from the dead." Yet the marriage supper of the Lamb lies in the future. "Blessed are they that are bidden to the marriage supper of the Lamb" (Rev. 19:9). That lies in the future, and a special blessedness is attached to it.

You see, there is a provisional factor governing the intentions of God - a provisional factor as to the realization of the purposes of all the things that God has done and given and into which He has brought us. There is an "if" all the time, and that "if" does not relate to the legal position at all. The Corinthians were all right as to the legal position of being in Christ. The first letter opens with the statement of that - "sanctified in Christ Jesus." They are all right as to their legal position; they can claim in Christ salvation. But it is not long before the Apostle in writing to them begins to speak to them about provisional things: this building upon the foundation, and all that is put on the foundation, and then it all going up in smoke, and believers just getting into heaven without anything else. It was all right legally there. If you like to stand upon the legal basis, you can get to heaven if you are in Christ. But there is so much more than that, and the so much more may just be missed.

Apply it if you like to this very relationship. There are many people legally married, and that is all there is to it; it ends there. They have certain rights and privileges because of the legal position, but who wants to stay there? Who will be satisfied with that? There is infinitely more in it than that, and that is what is here in the difference between the initial and the final, the legal and the spiritual. A very big difference indeed exists between those two. Or that difference may be graduated, as in the natural; the blessings of the relationship may be more or less. And that is how it is with Christians: they may be more or less in the blessings of this marriage relationship with the Lord.

Fellowship and Companionship

Let us try to sum this up in a few simple, and I think quite obvious, matters. Keeping to the illustration, or the type, the first marriage relationship of the first Adam; going back to look at that and look into it, and asking what were the Divine thoughts in it, we can transfer these thoughts to Christ and the Church, Christ and ourselves, in this most blessed of all the relationships - for indeed this is the most blessed of all the relationships with Christ. What was God's thought?

First of all, the Scripture indicates that He was prompted to bring about this union in the creating of the woman by the idea of companionship. "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18). That is all. But there is a wealth in that. It almost seems presumption to transfer that to Christ and the Church, and yet there are so many more extra factors and features in the relationship of the Church to Christ, as His wife, that confirm and bear that out. This is not the only thing. The bride-types of the Old Testament are so rich and so full of confirmatory factors that you may transfer the thought to Christ and the Church. There is a whole wealth of evidence and proof that they did point on to Christ and the Church. We are not going to take up that study just now, but there it is. The proof is abundant, and therefore we may, presumptuous as it seems, transfer this very point to our relationship with our Lord: that the Church has been created by God because of this very prompting of interest in and desire for companionship for His Son.

If you look at the Lord Jesus in the days in which He was here, you cannot fail to see how He longed for fellowship. Perhaps one of the saddest words that ever came from Him was - "Ye... shall leave me alone: and yet I am not alone, because the Father is with me" (John 16:32). But while that did not qualify His utterance or in any way make it a comparative thing, there was something of sadness about His word "I am alone." It is quite clear that He was always seeking companionship. He was a Man and He had the sense of this need of others, or another. It is a Divine thing. There is something about Christ which calls for fellowship - and it is a wonderful thing how the New Testament takes up that word "fellowship." What a rich word it is! I wish you would just get down to your concordance, which will give you this word "fellowship" in the original. You will find in that word alone a wealth of study and meditation, something very precious indeed. "Ye were called into the fellowship of his Son" (1 Cor. 1:9).

Well, that is, to begin with, the thought, the idea, of marital union: companionship or fellowship. Fellowship, in the first place, before companionship: just fellowship, that is all. The first note, the predominant note, in this relationship is simply fellowship.

What is fellowship? Well, fellowship is identity of life and purpose. Christ wanted those with Him in identity of life and identity of purpose, one heart with His heart; and you and I have been called into such a relationship. It is high, it is holy, it is precious that you and I should supply the Lord Jesus with a deep heart desire and longing for those who shall be in identification with His life and His purpose. That is all we will say for the

moment, but that is the first step in the meaning of marital union.

Companionship seems to me to go just a little further even than that, or to add an extra feature - for companionship, while certainly including what we have just said about fellowship, is the mutual complement, where each one makes up what is lacking in the other, each one makes a contribution to the other and fulfills the other; and it seems very wonderful - for that word in Ephesians, "the fullness of him" (Eph. 1:22), is the "complement" of Him, the "making full" of Him, the "making complete" of Christ - it seems marvelous that the Church could give something to Christ to make Him complete. It sounds like heresy to say it, yet there it is. It is clearly stated that there is a heritage which He has in the Church. What is "his inheritance in the saints"? It is something that the Church has to give to Him. I am not stopping to say what that is. It is a statement of fact that the Lord sees the Church as able to give Him something, provide Him with something - an opportunity, an occasion, a vessel, a means, a way - something which otherwise He has not got but which He must have. Well, we are here on this earth to be for Christ what He needs here. And as for His giving us anything, that goes without saying.

So, then, companionship is a making good from one to the other, the filling up, the complement of each other. That is the marital relationship. This is the heavenly idea of marriage.

The Vindication of Christ by the Family

And then we find that, in the creation of this relationship at the beginning, it was that they together might be a vessel, one vessel, to contain the great trust of LIFE. It is not a mechanical thing and it is not just a doctrinal, ecclesiastical, formal or legal thing. It is a vital thing. That is, it is a matter of life. And so this life was to express itself and with them together, the deposit of this sacred trust of life. That Satan captured that trust, and has captured that trust ever since, is perhaps, the deepest tragedy and catastrophe in the whole history of the human race. Oh, today, the awful tragedy of propagation! That is a terrible story. The trust of life, the trust of transmitting that life, was a sacred and holy trust to be guarded solemnly for God - and Satan captured it.

Passing from the type to the antitype, you see this trust is between Christ and His Church as the Bridegroom and the bride, as the Husband and the wife, this wonderful trust of spiritual propagation, spiritual increase. Where there are no souls being born something has gone wrong. The whole Divine idea has broken down, and where there is no concern and desire about it, something has gone wrong. Need I say anymore? We are brought by our marriage relationship to Christ into a most solemn and sacred trust of being the vehicle by which He shall see His seed and be satisfied. He is vindicated in His family. His life is vindicated. In Isaiah 53 you notice that His being cut off from the earth, having His name cut off, having His being cut off, the whole story of the determination to bring an end to Him, and of the effort of Satan to cut off His seed, is written there; but then the statement is, "he shall see his seed." Good Friday is past and Easter Day is here - and He shall see His seed. Blessed be God, He can already see it in the earth in some measure. It will be "a great multitude which no man can number," no man CAN number. Men can count pretty high; but they shall not be able to number His seed. It will be as the stars of the heaven, as the sand of the seashore. He is vindicated by His seed; Christ is vindicated by the salvation of souls. Christ is vindicated by the Church being the vessel and the instrument of His self-realization in that way. Did you notice how the statement in Romans 7 finished? "Joined to another... that we might bring forth fruit unto God."

The Ultimate Spiritual Union

With one very brief return to the point with which we started, we will close. Here is the legal, and here is how the legal ought to work out to the spiritual - to the spiritual union which is ultimate. The end of this thing is seen in the marriage supper of the Lamb. This means that the legal union has been fulfilled to the utmost, that these two are not only in this legal relationship as husband and wife, legally married and that is all there is to it. They are now more and more and ever more being married, if we may put it that way; they are growing into one another. The fellowship is dependent, the mutual contribution is increasing. One is becoming ever more to the other and the other to the one, and at last there is this bridal company "following the Lamb whithersoever He goeth," without a demur, without a question, without any rebellion, without any insubordination. The thing is to be eventually a spiritual fullness of oneness. That, of course, is how earthly married life ought to be if it is after the heavenly pattern - just a growing into each other, becoming incapable of getting on without each other, until at last there is such a merging that nothing whatever of difference or distance remains; it is complete unity.

That is the marriage supper, I think. "His wife hath made herself ready": that is, something has happened that has got rid of the final disparity. There is still a lot of disparity between us and our Lord, a lot of unsubmitiveness even now, a lot to be overcome in us even as His Church, His wife, a lot to be done in us;

Marital Union

but we seek that that shall be accomplished. We yield and we want to yield, and we want to come to the place where there is no more question at all: where it is utter, unquestioning yieldedness to Him Who has not only captured but captivated us completely; and that is the marriage supper of the Lamb, as I understand it. It is a spiritual thing - the consummation of a legal relationship.