

T. Austin-Sparks:

"I know a man in Christ" (2 Corinthians 12:2)

The object of our consideration is manhood in relation to the Lord's testimony, and for it we take a little phrase used by the apostle Paul about himself: "I knew a man in Christ". To it may be linked a few other simple phrases:

"I JESUS have sent my angel to testify unto you..." (Revelation 22:16)

"I JOHN, your brother and partaker with you..." (Revelation 1:9)

"Now I PAUL myself entreat you..." (2 Corinthians 10:1)

"I DANIEL understood by the books..." (Daniel 9:2)

These personal references were evidently inspired by the Holy Spirit, and therefore carry their own significance. Humanity is a divine conception, something taking its origin in the mind of God. Being, then, in the eternal thought of God, it has come to stay. There is nothing in all the Scriptures to indicate that God at some time, at some point, is going to finish that order of beings and replace it with another - angelic or otherwise. No, manhood has come to stay. In the divine thought, manhood is a very noble thing with a very great and high destiny.

THE DIGNITY OF MAN IN GOD'S THOUGHT

In this article we may have largely to be occupied with the correcting of faulty ideas in order to get at the true. Our ideas about man have become somewhat confused. Evangelical Christianity has placed great emphasis upon man's total depravity. I have nothing to take from that. We need to remember, however, that every truth runs close to error. It is just as true to affirm that man is a very wonderful creation, "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14). We are constantly discovering new realms within the human soul, and it is the soul of man which is the very core of humanity. From time to time we are surprised at what there is in us all of capability and capacity, of unsuspected forces at work. There are two sides to this matter of humanity; the one, which is perfectly true, of man's total depravity; the other, equally true, of the dignity of the human idea in the mind of God. These two must be properly balanced, or many evils may result. May we try to correct a few faulty ideas so that we can understand more of God's real thought concerning man?

OUR INDIVIDUALITY IS NOT ANNIHILATED BY THE CROSS

Running closely alongside of what is so often our unbalanced conception of man, there is our idea as to the meaning of the cross in his experience. We place a great deal of emphasis upon that side of the cross which relates to our identification with Christ in His death; not only the removal, by that death, of our sins, but also of ourselves. The cross wholly and utterly sets aside one kind of man. There is nothing to take from that, and nothing to add to it: it is true. But our individuality is not annihilated by the cross; the cross does not destroy our personal entity. It deals with the basis of that humanity upon which we are now living because of Adam, but it does not destroy us. We need to be very careful not to try to carry the cross into realms where it is never supposed to operate. We must not think that identification with Christ in death and burial somehow means that we cease to function as sensible beings. The cross is never meant to create or minister to asceticism.

OUR INDIVIDUALITY IS NOT LOST IN THE BODY OF CHRIST

Another faulty conception is related to membership of the body of Christ. The body of Christ is a great reality, a wonderful truth. We have nothing to take from the fact that we have a related life in Christ as members of His body. We must be careful, though, to avoid the false conception of the Church as Christ's body which regards the individual distinctiveness of each member as being destroyed so that all may be merged as it were into a general lump. Paul is very careful to point out the importance of the personal form of each member: "If the whole body were an eye... If the whole were hearing..." (1 Corinthians 12:17).

We have only to consider our own bodies, both inside and out, to know that the smallest organ has its own distinctiveness. Each has a specific form and a distinct function, and at times it is one of the effects of disease

that it destroys the distinctive function of some organ. If this is true physically, it can be true spiritually. We must not confuse individualism with individuality. That is a mistake. Yes, individualism is unacceptable but individuality is of supreme importance.

The same truth obtains in the whole creation. One of the wonders of God's creation is its endless variety. Yet the whole of the creation is interdependent: every branch depends on another branch, the flower on the bee and the bee on the flower. This is a divine principle found everywhere, each individual living thing must have its own form, though being dependent on others for the justification of its existence and the realisation of its destiny.

GOD'S IDEA IS A MAN

A further faulty idea is to think that God's work is performed by reason of an office rather than with the person who bears that office. We think of them under certain designations, such as 'ministers', 'missionaries', 'whole-time workers' or 'preachers', but God thinks of them in their capacity as human beings. They must not cease to be persons and become things. It is easy for those concerned to regard themselves as something that belongs to a platform or a class and so obscure the importance of personality. We may think of sending out a missionary, but God talks of sending a man. It is the man not the occupation which matters with Him, and we must not let any office obscure the character of the person who holds it.

GOD WANTS ORIGINALITY

Here is a very important point, this matter of originality. From one point of view it may be argued that there is nothing in itself really original: "There is nothing new under the sun" was what Solomon said. Nevertheless God can do in us that which makes "all things new". Nothing should be copied or mechanical in our life and ministry, but everything emerging from a first-hand experience of God. This is the secret of spiritual authority. What made the authority of the Lord Jesus greater than that of the scribes (Matthew 7:29) was not that He had more academic information than they had, but that He clearly spoke from His own experience, He spoke directly from God.

On our case, too, God demands a history behind what we say. His testimony is not the mechanical propagation of truths but their living power as embodied in human lives. We are not here just to stand as a kind of middle man, taking up from a store and passing on in a mechanical way, but to communicate what has become original spiritual truth in our own personal experience. Originality is essential. Everything has got to begin with us before it can be given to others with an effect or lasting value. We need to begin with personal history. We cannot live on the experience of others, however real those experiences were to them.

"I JESUS." Does not that impress you, coming right at the end of the Bible and being the last utterance of the Lord to His churches? Notice that He did not say, "I the Lord", but "I Jesus". All Bible students know that in the New Testament the name 'Jesus' refers to the days of His earthly life. After His exaltation they always added 'Lord' to His other titles and names, and the apostles only used the name Jesus alone when they wished to emphasise His perfect humanity. Used by itself the name refers back to His life of humiliation when He took the form of a man. "He was found in fashion as a man" (Philippians 2:7). The word 'fashion' means that in all outward appearance He was like other men. Another word is used of what He was inside; that was something other. But in this outward fashion as a man He took the name Jesus, which was one of the most common names in Palestine then. So the name carries us back to the day when He was going through all that which made spiritual history in Himself - tried, tested, tempted in all points like as we are (Hebrews 4:15) and being "made perfect through sufferings" (Hebrews 2:10). History was being made in His Humanity. As a Man, He was learning obedience by the things which He suffered (Hebrews 5:8). This in no way questions His deity. It means that though God incarnate, Jesus was knowing all about human life, making spiritual history in terms of manhood, with intrinsic values which will be for the ages of the ages. Having done all that in terms of manhood, He at last presents Himself to His churches, saying: "I Jesus".

Then there is the writer of the book who introduces himself with the phrase, "I John". His experience was on so much smaller a scale, yet in its measure it was true that what he wrote was not something which had come mechanically to him but the result of vital experience. Of the Word he was able to say: "That which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, and our hands handled...". It has become a part of us. We have a vital relationship with the truth as it is in Him. It follows that we are now in a position to mention ourselves in relation to the testimony of Jesus.

Then Paul, who spoke of himself as "a man in Christ" was also allowed to bring himself into view with the

authority of one who had history behind him: "Behold, I Paul say unto you..." (Galatians 5:2). What Paul taught had become the very substance of his being. He was not talking about abstract truths but about things which had actually happened to him. Having had the truth wrought into him he could affirm in the Spirit: "I Paul say unto you".

Was that not also true of Daniel? "O MAN greatly beloved" (Daniel 10:19). God did not say to him: "O prophet greatly beloved" or "O servant of the Lord greatly beloved" but "O man...". The man is a man of God, a man in the Lord, and so there is great spiritual authority when he says: "I Daniel".

Naturally woman is included, for God is concerned with humanity. He plans to fulfil His will in human beings. Leaving aside our special reference to Jesus, whom we know as a human being PLUS, we glory in the fact that these servants of God were so essentially human. John was so human. Paul was so human. Daniel was a human being. Through His Son God makes something of Himself as a part of human life, and in doing so constitutes the testimony of Jesus.

God's great objective with you is not to make you a Bible teacher, a missionary, a Christian worker. These may emerge, according to the form which your life may take, but they will not be eternal. It is you as a man or a woman with whom God is taking such pains, He is more concerned with our humanity than with anything else. You will misunderstand His ways with you if you fail to recognise that. You will be tempted to worry about your reputation, your job, your function, while God is supremely concerned with the kind of man you will be in Christ. All else is of lesser importance. The great thing is for God to find His eternal satisfaction in glorified men - men in Christ.

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