

T. Austin-Sparks:**Chapter 1 - The Eternal Conception and Decision****Reading: Ezra 6.**

Christianity has many aspects and Christian people are occupied with those various aspects; such as evangelism, teaching, building up of believers, or contending for the faith. There are movements entirely devoted to the study of prophetic matters related to the coming again of Christ, and so on. All these are right. But they can, and often do, become things in themselves and, while being so good and right, have the effect of dividing Christians into sections, circling round some interpretation or some teaching or some specific object. The inclusive and supreme object of God, in and through and over all, is thereby very often lost sight of.

It is the purpose of these pages to seek to bring that object more definitely into view. Our concern is with God's inclusive object and purpose. I am sure you will agree that the value of any one aspect or side of teaching or work will be governed, very largely, by its relationship to the whole purpose of God. The value will be more immediate if that whole purpose is seen, and kept all the time in view. God does not commit Himself wholly or exclusively to any one part of His purpose; He only commits Himself wholly to the all of His intention. If we desire to find God committing Himself, it becomes very necessary for us to know what are the conditions and ground for His committal.

The inclusive object to which we refer is inherent in the few simple words which we have taken for our general title, from the sixth chapter of the book of Ezra: "Let the house be builded" (Ezra 6:3). That is God's all-inclusive object. You notice that Ezra traced this decree back through and beyond the instrument, the ruler who made it. He traced it back to God. He recognized that this decree, while made by an earthly ruler, originated with God (v.22). He said: 'God put it into the heart of the king.' (7:27) This came from God. And, having shown that it originated with God, in the rest of the story he shows how God, in sovereign ways, committed Himself to it. God instigated this; God supported this; and, in spite of numerous and great difficulties, God consummated this.

If that was true then, we want to discover how it can be true in our time. I believe that all the people of God, all true Christians, are deeply desirous knowing, in our time, what it is that God has instigated, what it is that God takes upon Himself to support and see through, what it is that, in spite of everything - a great, vast everything - God will finish. We want to discover how God will commit Himself.

The Eternity of God

That brings us to a vital and fundamental principle of Biblical interpretation. It is a thing that everybody who handles the Word of God ought to recognize, and when we take up our Bibles it ought always to be present. It is simply the eternity of God. That bare statement perhaps does not convey very much to you at first. But the great fact is that there is no time with God. All 'time', as it is with us, is 'present' with God; with Him there is no past, present, future. He is the Eternal God - "from eternity to eternity Thou art God" (Ps 90:2). God may accommodate Himself to the time-periods of men and this earth, but He Himself dwells in Eternity: His thoughts are eternal thoughts; His purpose is an eternal purpose. The architect has the whole plan before him; the builder only has the day-to-day part or parts. Those who only see the parts may be confused; they may not understand; they may even begin to take the part for the whole. A writer of one of the New Testament documents introduced his thesis in these words: "God, having of old time spoken unto the fathers in the prophets... in diverse manners..." (Heb 1:1). God did speak in time, at different times, in different manners and different portions; but, with God, the whole, from eternity, was present, and every part that came from Him had the whole in it.

We must ever remember that when we are handling the Bible; otherwise we shall "wrongly divide" the Word of Truth. The full design of God governs every part, as far as He is concerned. God's mind does not grow. There is no progress with God; He is full and complete and final at all times. God has brought His thoughts into time by means of models and figures, but they are only models and figures of spiritual and eternal realities. And the principle is this, that whatever comes from God, at any time from our standpoint, from this world's standpoint - whatever comes from God, however partial it may seem to be, has in it the eternal and complete thought of God. It contains within itself the whole of the spiritual mind of God. We have to look through the immediate form of presentation, to discover the spiritual and eternal thought that lies there.

This house - "Let the house be buildded" - is only an earthly, temporary, limited representation of the vast eternal, spiritual thought of God. It is but a poor representation, and it will pass; but God's thought will never pass. What lies behind it will have no end: it has come out of Eternity; it will go on to Eternity. And the whole Bible is just a manifold expression of this principle. From beginning to end, in its numerous forms of presentation and representation, in its types, symbols and figures, the whole Bible is one comprehensive and many-sided expression of this one idea, that lies here inherent in this word 'House'.

God Coming Out From Eternity

Let us get behind the figures, behind the representation, to the great spiritual truth and reality. Here it is. Out from eternity, out from unknowableness, out from incomprehensibility, out from inaccessibility, God resolved to presence Himself in a special, unique creation, a spiritual organism, of His own devising; in something which, amongst many other titles and designations, is called in the Scriptures a house. God determined to come out, from all that vast unknowable, inaccessible, eternal realm and presence Himself, make Himself known, make Himself accessible, in a 'house' or dwelling-place. That is the truth that is running all the way through the Bible, from beginning to end; that is the thing that is governing everything, which we shall see as we proceed.

But as we take hold of that great truth, and move with it through the Bible, we begin to make a discovery about it. We begin to find that, while it is certainly a wonderful idea, an amazing thought, it is also something much more than just a thought and an idea. We find, in fact, that it involves the very heart of God - not only His mind, but His heart; it is something greatly cherished by God; something with which God's greatest interests are bound up. Far from being something objective to God, it turns out (if I may put it like that) to be a very part of Himself - of His thought, of His will, of His very heart.

One of the most staggering statements in the Bible is surely this: "...The church of God which He purchased with His own Blood" (Acts 20:28). God purchased this that is called 'the Church' with His own Blood. That will defeat and defy every attempt at fathoming and comprehension. Blood is the very vitality of any organism. This 'thing' (forgive the term for the moment) has the very life of God bound up with it. God has given His life for it. That is something more than a matter of objective interest. The very heart of God is in this - His own life - Himself.

God Present With Man

What is this thought, then, this thing so near to the heart of God, with which all His interests are bound up? It is God present amongst men: God related to an organism, as the Inhabitant, the Occupier, the Indweller of that organism. The simple, plain meaning of a 'house' is, surely, something to be dwelt in, to be lived in; it has no meaning unless it is inhabited. God's thought is to be there, present, indwelling with the object of making Himself known and understood, and with the object of having blessed fellowship with that which comprises the 'house'.

I have said that the Bible contains the history of that thought, that eternal and Divine concept through the ages. It begins with a very simple, primal expression of the thought: the man and the woman in the garden, and God present, walking in the garden, talking, communing, making His thoughts and intentions known. It is a picture of happy fellowship between God and man, man and God. Man is shown in relationship with God, in terms of friendship (if I may use that word), and on a basis of commission to be God's regent here for the development and fulfilment of His purposes. Everything speaks of peace and order and beauty, and all that the human heart longs for. God has created for Himself a 'house', and is in it, and is walking in it, and talking in it. It is there in this simple first representation.

From that point, the Divine intention has a long and chequered history. Remember that all the actions of God are related to that one 'thing', and all the reactions in history, recorded in the Bible, are against that thing - to drive God out, to exclude God, to bring about conditions in which God cannot be present, to which He cannot commit Himself. It focuses upon this one eternal desire of the heart of God.

God's Intention Realized In Christ Personal and Christ Corporate

But where does it end? Yes, it is a long and chequered history, but, in the end, the intention is realized. And it is realized in two ways: firstly, it is realized in God Himself, as incarnate in His Son. We have not recognized the supreme significance of Jesus Christ, as the Son of God, until we have recognized that in Him this eternal conception finds its realization; He is Emmanuel - "God with us"! God has reached His object. He Himself has

made for Himself an abode. "God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself" (2 Cor 5:19). In that first and fundamental way God reaches His end: and so we discover that the House of God is not an 'it' - it is a 'Him'; it is a Person. And then He proceeds from the One to the many, from the individual to the corporate; and an elect Body is brought into view, in terms of a dwelling-place for God. The end of the Bible is again in symbolism as much as the beginning was - a City and a Garden - and we hear the music of these words: "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). That is where the Bible ends. History is consummated.

I have said that this divine intention explains the Bible from every angle; that all the action and all the reaction are centered in this one thing, that God may have a place for Himself where He may dwell, in these terms of fellowship and peace. There is, in fact, nothing in the Bible that is not related to this all-governing purpose and thought of God. Here is the object of the Father's concern and of God's jealousy. If God was jealous over a temple in Jerusalem, or over Jerusalem or Zion, as the prophets so strongly said, do you think that His jealousy was exhausted in such an earthly, temporary representation? No, it was because of the something represented that God was jealous.

What is the House of God?

What then, is the House of God? The question is raised by God Himself, through His servant Isaiah: "Thus saith Jehovah, 'The heaven is My throne, and the earth is My footstool: what manner of house will ye build unto Me, and what place shall be My rest? For all these things hath Mine hand made...'" (Isaiah 66:1-2 RSV) You remember how Stephen, in that magnificent message which cost him his life - so significant in this very connection - quoted these words from Isaiah. It was almost the culmination of that great discourse; it all worked up, headed up to this. He says: "Solomon built himself a house... But... but... what manner of house will ye build Me, saith the Lord?" (Acts 7:47-49) "The Heaven of heavens cannot contain Him" (2 Chron 2:6)

1. The Infinite Greatness of the House

What manner of house? There are some things there to take note of. Firstly, it is an intimation of the infinite, infinite greatness of God requiring something infinitely great. No magnificent temple, whether of Solomon or of any other builder, can answer to this demand. It requires something infinitely great to show forth the greatness of God. The apostle Paul, more than anyone else in the Bible, saw the meaning of this House; and, in spite of the wonderful richness, comprehensiveness and flexibility of the Greek tongue, he exhausted all the language at his command in trying to speak about it. With all his knowledge of words and language, Paul was hard put to it to find words in which to express the reality of this House - the breadth and the length and the height and the depth, and so on. He wrestles with human language, but it all fails to express how great this is.

But note - and here is the wonderful thing, where we are getting very near to it, or it is getting very near to us - there are some things that the apostle Paul does make clear as defining the nature and purpose of this house.

2. The Place of the "Knowledge-Surpassing Love"

Firstly, that it is that in which the "knowledge-surpassing love" of God is manifested (Eph 3:19). God conceived this objective order, in order to demonstrate in it something of the knowledge-surpassing love of His heart. And then Paul speaks of grace - the "riches of His grace" (1:7, 2:7), the "glory of His grace" (1:6) and he brings that all into relationship with this House, that "in the ages to come" (2:7) in that House, Body (call it what you will), there should be displayed to a wondering universe the infinite grace of God. But Paul does not stop there: he passes to wisdom (3:10) The infinite wisdom of God is to be shown to 'principalities and powers' - in this House! It requires a big House to comprehend the greatness of His love, and the greatness of His grace, and the greatness of His wisdom - God present in such terms of Self-manifestation!

Man's Misapprehension

But there is another thing implied here. It is the implied misapprehension of man. When it is a matter of 'big ideas', wonderful conceptions, man has a way, as we know, of 'catching on' and taking hold of them. Man has got hold of this idea of a 'house for God', a 'dwelling for God', and has given it a twist and brought into it a false interpretation. Man has tried to capture God and put Him into a house of man's own making. By so doing, he has tried to limit God, confine God, possess God, make God exclusive to some particular 'house' made by man - a building or an institution on earth. This inveterate propensity of man to make God his property, and the property of his particular kind of house, leads to the uprise of a terrible exclusivism: saying, in effect, that, if you do not belong here, go this way, then you are outside the pale. It is the effect of an idea taken hold of, but

misapplied - a false interpretation.

That was Israel's tragic blunder, against which the prophets raged and stormed. It was that into which Jesus came. Like new wine in old wineskins, His coming burst the whole thing; but it cost Him His life. They had made God's house an exclusive thing, their own - they 'possessed' God. That was their blunder. And, as Jesus was walking away into the eternal, spiritual reality, He said, "Your house is left unto you desolate" (Matt 23:38) - your house, your house! That is an awful indictment - your house!

Christ The Corrective

1. Personally

We must take this all very seriously, because, from one point of view, it was this misapprehension, this false interpretation, this caricature, that Jesus came to correct. He did so in two ways. As we have pointed out, He corrected it, firstly, in His own Person. Do you want to see the House of God, what it is? - look at Him! Secondly, He did it in His teaching. The gospel by John, if we did but recognize it, stands, in the whole Biblical purpose, to show how Jesus supplants and transcends all earthly and material representations. It makes perfectly clear that He supplants and takes the place of the temple in Jerusalem. He supplanted and took the place of the priesthood, Himself became the High Priest and offered Himself a sacrifice acceptable to God, thus not only fulfilling all types, but showing that until Christ offered Himself God had never been satisfied. He supplanted and transcended all the Jewish feasts: you notice how in John's gospel the feasts of the Jews are constantly referred to, and Jesus figures in them, over against them, in contrast.

Jesus takes the place of the manna in the wilderness: He is the 'bread of God come down from Heaven' (John 6:33). Jesus takes the place of the water from the smitten rock and says: "Whosoever drinketh of the water that I shall give him shall never thirst." (John 4:14). "He that believeth on Me, out of Him shall flow rivers of living water" (John 7:38). He takes the place of the lights in the temple, and says: "I am the light of the world" (John 8:12). He takes the place of all the old shepherds of Israel, and says: "I am the good Shepherd." (John 10:11,14). He takes the place of Israel, and builds a new flock out of His own blood: "I lay down My life for the sheep." (verse 15). Jesus is the answer to God's eternal quest.

2. Corporately

But Jesus, as the New Testament goes on to show, does not stand alone. Jesus in corporate, organic expression is the House of God. Where and what is the House of God? It is where there is spiritual, organic, vital union with Christ; no more, no less. Says Paul: "In one Spirit were we all baptized into one body." (1 Cor 12:13). Jesus fulfils all the functions and expresses all the features of God's presence - God's presence in the midst of men.

This is a statement, but it is a challenge. How great is His House - but how spiritually definite is His House! It is built upon the love of God. The very object and purpose of this House is for the expression of the love of God. And if that love of God is not present, or is contradicted, the House ceases to be what God intended it to be. It is the explanation of why Israel, who were once called 'God's House' as a nation, were set aside. Here is the infinite love of God, the infinite grace of God, brought into the world in the Person of His Son: and what does He meet? Infinite hate! Love cast out! Very well, then - "Your house is left unto you desolate".

All this doctrine and theology - even about justification, not by works but by faith, and so on - can be so cold, after all; it can become hard, legalistic, 'righteous'. But remember that that is all there in the Word of God in order to magnify the grace of God! "Not of works..." but the grace of God. The House of God exists on the basis that men and women have discovered that their deepest and most terrible need is for the grace of God, and they have come into the knowledge of that grace. The one word uppermost in their vocabulary is the word 'grace' - it is the most wonderful word in the language of earth and Heaven. Grace, grace, grace! It is that which constitutes the House of God. If you and I are living in the meaning of that wonderful word 'grace', we shall know God very near to us. God 'beholdeth the proud afar off', because the proud have no sense of their need of grace. Pride is an abomination to God, simply because it is such a contradiction of the grace of God. "To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit, and that trembleth at My word" (Isa 66:2). That is the atmosphere of the House of God.

And so, you see, God's House is not a 'thing', it is not a 'place' - it is not anything that man makes; it is something spiritual. On what ground does it rest? It rests on the ground of the Cross. God's House in the wilderness - the Tabernacle - came after the Altar, and stood as the background to the Altar. In the new

dispensation, the Church is the background to the Cross of Christ, for it only comes by the Cross. What does the Cross do? It sets man aside, and makes room for God; it puts man out, that God may be all and in all. God's intention in the Cross is to make possible the realization of His eternal thought to be present, to be there. Where the Cross is most deeply wrought into the life of a people, there, most fully, you will meet the Lord. You will not meet Him in uncrucified men and women; in the presence of the flesh, God stands back.

The Need for Christ-Consciousness

In closing, we will ask one more question. What is the dominant necessity? The answer is twofold. The dominant necessity for the realization of God's desire - the bringing in of this House, in its beauty, in its love, in its grace, in its fellowship, in its peace, in its order, in its Divine manifestation - is a Christ-consciousness. Perhaps that does not convey much as it is stated. But what you and I need perhaps more than anything else, is more of this Christ-consciousness. Are we not ever and always rebuked when we hear Paul say, "the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that One died for all, therefore all died... that they which live should no longer live unto themselves, but unto Him... wherefore we henceforth know no man after the flesh..." (2 Cor 5:14-16)? Are we not always rebuked by that? Do we not know one another so much after the flesh? Instead of laying hold on whatever there may be, even remotely, of Christ, in one another and making the most of that, we do the other thing: we make the most of one another's faults and weaknesses and un-Christlikeness - and there is plenty of it, God knows!

But oh, for this Christ-consciousness - that we might give ourselves more to this laying hold of what there is of Christ, however small, and making the most of that. The House would be built, God would find His House and commit Himself if we would do that. God help us! And Christ-consciousness means House-consciousness, fellowship-consciousness, relatedness-consciousness, that we are members one of another, so that the hand cannot say to the foot, "I do not need you. I can do without you". It is this corporate consciousness that is so needed today, to destroy all that is disintegrating and divisive

God grant that something of the impact of this may come upon our hearts, and lift us out of our all-too-small conceptions of the House of God. May it govern our attitudes in relation to all - all who rest upon the love of God, all rest upon the grace of God, all who have come to see and to acknowledge that it is only by the wisdom of God, in solving all the human problems, their own and others, that God will at last find what He is seeking - a place in which to dwell.