

T. Austin-Sparks:

We are going to resume our meditations on union with Christ. Having been occupied with Christ Himself, the meaning of Christ, seeking to set the background, lay the foundation, in some little understanding of His greatness and of His place, we now should be able to follow on with the meaning of our union with Him. You will see that the New Testament gives us various conceptions of that union. These are not different unions that is to say, the similes used of these unions do not apply to different bodies of people. They are only aspects of the one union, but each one has its own particular significance and value.

So we begin with

1. Eternal Union with Christ

Let us first of all look at the first chapter of the letter to the Ephesians:

"Even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world" (verse 4).

"Having foreordained us unto adoption as sons through Jesus Christ unto himself, according to the good pleasure of his will" (verse 5).

"In whom also we were made an heritage" (verse 11).

And if you ask, When were we made a heritage?

"Having been foreordained according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his will" (verse 11).

"To them that are called according to his purpose. For whom he foreknew, he also foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Romans 8:28-29).

"Elect... according to the foreknowledge of God the Father" (1 Peter 1:1,2).

"...The men whom thou gavest me... thine they were, and thou gavest them to me... Keep them in thy name which thou hast given me" (John 17:6,11).

I ought at once to say that we are not embarking upon a theological discussion or argument. This matter of election or foreordination or predestination has passed almost entirely into schools of doctrine and has split the Church into parties through the ages, and it still remains largely an academic subject, to be debated, argued, wrestled with intellectually. For our part we will have none of it. It would be unprofitable, it would get us nowhere and we are not moving in that realm. We are seeking spiritual values, practical values for our own spiritual lives, and so we lift this matter right out of the realm of argument and debate and seek to see it in the light of Christ. It is entirely governed by Christ, for it is only in Christ that it exists.

But, before we go further, I want to say this. This matter of election relates to the Church and must be confined to the Church. (I would prefer to call the Church by the name of "the elect," because the very word "Church" has become an ecclesiastical conception.) It belongs to the Church, the Church belongs to it, and its real meaning has only been divulged in this dispensation. We are given to understand by the Word of God that all previous dispensations were pointing to, leading to and heading up to this dispensation, as though there were a drive behind them to reach a dispensation of fullness or completeness. They were all partial, imperfect, unsatisfactory, all just reaching a certain point and then fading out and waiting for the next phase. So phase passed to phase, and on to another phase, and still there was the waiting, the hoping, the expecting, the requiring, and then this age or dispensation came. It is called in the New Testament the "dispensation of the fullness of the times" (Eph. 1:10). That is a very significant little phrase. The times are made full, all the times are made full, in this one. All those which lack fullness and finality are filled up in this one. This one gives that which they lacked and needed; this is the dispensation of the fullness, or completeness, of the times. This is what the Apostle calls "the ends of the ages" (1 Cor. 10:11).

Now, it is helpful if you can arrange the ages as segments of a circle rather than in a straight line. If you take the straight line idea, you leave a lot of unfinished ends, one after another, but if you arrange them in a circle, then you find them all meeting at one point. They are not just unfinished ends in themselves, but they find their fulfillment at one point: all the ages gather round and meet at one center - the age in which all the ages meet. "Upon whom the ends of the ages are come": that does not only refer to past ages. It refers also to future ages: for they come into this, they take their character from this age, they take their meaning from this age, so that ages past and future are centered in this dispensation. And when this dispensation comes in in fullness - for, although it was introduced in a way by the coming of Christ in the flesh, the age did not come in fullness until

the day of Pentecost: it would seem that on the day of Pentecost heaven could wait no longer, the Holy Spirit could wait no longer, all Divine purposes could wait no longer; and immediately they had the signal - the signal being Christ taking His seat at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens - immediately they got that signal, it was as though they all rushed in and brought this marvelous sense of arrival, of having come. There is a lot in that - "When the day of Pentecost was now fully come": it has probably a larger sense than that it was well into the hours of the day. It proved to be as though everything had been waiting for this everything had been looking for this, everything had been breathless in its suspense for this, and there was such fullness in that day and with the coming of that day that it has overflowed backward and forward into all the ages - fullness of meaning to the past and fullness of character to the future. It reached back to past eternity and it reached on unto the ages of the ages. What the fiftieth year and day meant in the Jewish economy was far transcended on this "Day of Pentecost."

And what happened on the day of Pentecost? Well, the Church was born: the age of the Church in fullness commenced. We are told distinctly by the Apostle that this whole thing, this mystery, had been "hid for ages and generations; but now hath it been manifested," and that the ministry is "to make all men see what is the dispensation of the mystery which from all ages hath been hid in God" (Col.1:26; Eph. 3:9). You see, it is this "elect" which is the heart of the ages and of the universe.

(a) The Fact Governed by the Meaning of Christ

And why therefore is it so important? Why all this? Why is this age such a great age, and why is it that in this age heaven's fullness has been poured out? Why all this excitement, if we might so put it, on the day of Pentecost and thereafter? Well, that is just the point in our whole meditation. It is all governed by the meaning of Christ. Christ is God's Son and He is called "the firstborn of all creation" (Col. 1:15), God's Firstborn, and everywhere in Divine revelation that designation means the HEIR. He is the "heir of all things" (Heb. 1:2). He must have an inheritance. The idea of the Firstborn is nonsense if there is no inheritance. Its very sense is that He must have an inheritance. "In whom also we were made a heritage" (Eph. 1:11). What is the "also"? Look at the context. "To sum up all things in Christ... in whom also we were made a heritage." "We" - who is meant by the "we"? The Church. The Church is a part, the central part, of the vast inheritance of God's Son on which we have been speaking earlier in this series. "The Church is the main part, the most important part, of those all things that form the inheritance of God's Son. "In whom also we were made a heritage". Simply, it was this. God determined an inheritance for His Son. God knew what that inheritance would be - we will at least cede Him that. Even an earthly father intending and deciding to give his son an inheritance would have some idea of what it would be. And then he would certainly not leave it to chance: he would secure it, he would see to it that there was an inheritance to have. So God created all things through and unto Jesus Christ His Son. He made His Son the horizon of all things. That is, the whole inheritance was horizoned and circled by His Son; He made "in Christ" to be its sphere.

Now, that is very important, because it is not only a statement of a comprehensive truth. It is a statement of a discriminating truth. The Bible, the New Testament, makes it perfectly clear that there is that which is not in Christ and there are those who are not in Christ. That "in Christ" is quite discriminating. There has been a good deal of playing fast and loose with these fragments. "As in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive" (1 Cor. 15:22), and that has been given a comprehensiveness which it will not carry. In Christ you shall be made alive; out of Christ you will not. "He that hath the Son hath the life; he that hath not the Son of God hath not the life" (1 John 5:12). "This is life eternal, that they should know thee the only true God, and him whom thou didst send, even Jesus Christ" (John 17:3). "In Christ" is a discriminating sphere as well as a comprehensive inheritance. There is also all "out of Christ."

Well then, allowing God to choose for His Son an inheritance, to define the inheritance, to create the inheritance, to determine that the inheritance should come to Him, we surely will allow that, being God, He foreknew the "in Christ" people. That is as far as I am going to carry the argument side of it.

Of course, there is all the time pressing in and insinuating itself the question, How do we know? That is where we move, if we will, right out of the realm of mere doctrinal discussion. All that argument, discussion, analysis and so on is largely due, either to man's insatiable curiosity or to his unfathomable pride - that streak in man which will not let God know anything unless man knows it. God must not know anything, do anything, unless we can explain it. Now, God's explanations are always practical; they are never theoretical or intellectual. They are always practical and they are always spiritual, and when you recognize that, you realize why it is that you can argue and debate and discuss and analyze, and pursue the whole thing along the line of reason and intellect until you go to the grave, and have never settled the thing finally at all. The reason for this, as you well know, is that God has never intended to explain Himself intellectually at all.

And yet there is a more complete and utter and glorious answer to all the problems and all the questions than the intellectual one. When you come to peace and rest and assurance and satisfaction in heart, that is a better argument than anything else. Someone put the whole matter of predestination and election this way. You come to a door, and that door is Christ, and on the outside of that door is written, "Whosoever will may come"; and you pass through the door, and look on the other side, the inside of the door, and you see, "Chosen... in him before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). It is inside that you discover the reality of election, never outside. You will never have the answer to that question, Am I of the elect? outside. You have to put away all your questions and come to the Lord Jesus: the answer is experimental, it is spiritual. The question vanishes then; it just disappears. We shall come back to that presently. What we have been saying is that the fact of eternal union is governed by the meaning of Christ, and by that which He inherits, as a Son.

(b) Transcending the Fall of Man

Eternal union transcends the fall or rebellion of man. Man's rebellion does not cancel God's purpose concerning His Son; his fall does not denote God's defeat - not by any means. God, from His side, though He is revealed as hurt, saddened, grieved, and involved in a new situation, nevertheless, as sovereign God, goes tranquilly on. Man has rebelled, man has fallen. It makes no difference to God's purpose, not a little bit of difference. He continues quietly on the heavenly line and begins to lift man on to the heavenly line again through faith. That is the story of the Old Testament - men being lifted back on to the heavenly line through faith.

Faith has one function. The function of faith is to lift out of the ruin; out of the ruined race, out of the ruined world - out of time back into eternity. It is to lift us out from here, from ourselves and what we are and what we are involved in, up on to the heavenly level. The Old Testament shows that that is the function of faith all the way through. Every time God called for an exercise of faith it brought a man out of where he was and put him into union with God in heaven. Abraham; Israel, a heavenly people: with that bit of blue on the border of the garment of every man in Israel saying that he did not belong down here, he belonged up there, in heaven: he was walking by faith. Faith's one function is to regain heavenly ground. That has, of course, a multitude of aspects and applications, but do remember that. Every time there is a challenge to faith, that is the issue. Am I going to stay in myself or am I going to stay in God? Am I going to stay in this world or am I going to abide in heaven? That is always the issue with faith, right down to its minute details. Dispensations are only different forms of the operation of faith. Faith is the same in every dispensation. Different forms of faith's operations are represented by different economies from time to time, but faith is the same, faith is timeless, dispensationless. Faith is above all dispensations and yet it embraces them all.

You see what that means. Faith makes a heavenly people in every dispensation. Faith has the same effect all the way through history. It counters that drop into something not of heaven, not of God. It counters that, contradicts, denies, works against it. Faith at once brings you back before the Fall. It transcends man's rebellion and man's fall. That is the argument of Paul in the first chapters of the Roman letter. Faith puts you back somewhere. It is called justification. It makes you right, puts everything right for you and with you, positions you again as though you had never fallen, "in Christ." Faith counters it all. The order of faith commenced immediately man rebelled and sinned, and by faith Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all the others were heavenly men. God reacted in that way, and so the eternal union now transcends the Fall, through faith.

(c) Enhanced by the Redemption of Man

Eternal union is enhanced by the redemption of man. When man fell, God was not defeated. It only meant that He brought into operation a provisional measure or economy which He had already worked out. Just at that point some terrible things have been said in order to try to support an erroneous teaching. I have heard it dogmatically stated that the Fall was in the Divine intention. God intended man to fall in order to show His grace. If you can accept that man had to fall, that it was in the Divine plan that he should do so in order that grace might be revealed - accept it, if you like; I cannot. What I see is the Fall not being in God's intention or will at all: He would have had it otherwise. But He had foreseen it and had provided for it, and when it took place He brought in His provisional measure of redemption, a measure which He had already worked out, the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world - He put that into operation.

Just as the higher qualities of any person come out in an emergency: it is in an emergency that you discover what people's qualities are, and sometimes emergency reveals something you never suspected: just as this is so in the human realm, so transcendentally was it true in the Divine. The emergency brought out something very

wonderful in God. It brought out grace, and two words from that time were combined. Before that it was one word: sovereignty. After the Fall it was sovereign grace, sovereignty working through grace, grace the handmaid of sovereignty. No, God did not intend the Fall. At least, that is my conviction. But God is always, always has been, more magnificent in an emergency. We have discovered that. It is the excellence of God that comes out in our emergencies. It was like that with the Fall. Grace came to light.

Perhaps you are still wanting to enter into the argumentative realm. If man had never fallen, look what we should have lost. We should never have known the magnificence of grace. How are you going to answer that? Well, let us look at the human family for a moment. Here is a father and there is a little child. Does it require that all the wonderful, gracious gifts and endowments of the father's love be lavished in order to draw out the love of the child for its father? Not at all. The little child loves the father, and, where it is an ideal case, loves the father without the father having to do all sorts of gracious things to win that love. It loves the father, because, well, it does love the father, and the father could not wish for anything more than that. Translate that into the realm of God and the children. We, if we had gone on, if there had been no Fall, would have gone on in utter love and devotion. That is what the Father wanted - and, mark you, God is always trying to get us on to that plane of loving Him just for Himself and not for what He does for us. That is the highest love. We do not get there, but that is what He is after. Have we said enough on that matter? We must hasten to a close.

The Holy Spirit the Custodian of the Eternal Purpose

The Holy Spirit is eternal; He is related to purpose; He is the link with Christ; and He is the earnest of the inheritance. That is to say, when we receive the Holy Spirit, we are at once joined to Christ: therefore we are joined at once with God's purpose concerning Christ. We are therefore linked with eternity and have left time. Is that too fine a way of arguing? We are linked with eternity, for the Spirit is eternal. The Spirit has not just come to be here with us for the little while of our life here, just a temporary guest staying for a night and departing. The presence of the Holy Spirit within at once links us with timelessness, and in that timelessness with the eternal purpose of God concerning His Son, and in that purpose with the Son Himself as governing all; and when we receive the Spirit we receive the earnest, the token, the security, of the inheritance of Christ. That is wonderful. That is where we come back to what we were saying. We have been secured by the indwelling Spirit as Christ's, as belonging to Christ, and Christ is secured to us for ever. The Spirit is the earnest of the inheritance. This is the inspiring answer of God to all questions about election. Have you received the Spirit? If you have not, you have no answer to any questions. If you have, you have the answer to every question, and particularly to this one. Union with Christ is the answer to all our questions.

Union with Christ is a crisis, a definite act, instantly giving a sense of - This is the answer to everything: all my questions are answered, not in my brain but in my heart; to everything that I have tried to understand and grasp and comprehend I have the answer inside. It is like that. Yet note this. The receiving of the Holy Spirit, while bringing that immediately - "The Spirit himself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ" (Rom. 8:16,17) - while that is true at the inception of the Christian life in union with Christ, note this: that a life in the Spirit and with the Spirit is a continuous course, or succession, of proofs of election.

Perhaps you have never thought of that. If we do really walk with the Holy Spirit, we find that He is leading us into things that we never thought of, never intended - but, as He does it, we have to say, This is not something that has just arisen, this is something that was intended by God; I am just coming into a program; the Lord has not shown me the whole program, but this is like item after item on the program. Is that not the story of the book of Acts? The Holy Spirit has a program. He has not revealed it, but as they move in the Spirit, how the whole thing is a mosaic. How wonderful it is! This thing was ordained from eternity. You could not avoid it. God is working to it and holding us to it. "We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God afore prepared that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10).

You look back on your life. You may be disappointed in many ways with your part in the business. You may be able to see many falterings and blunderings and mistakes that you on your side made. You may have sometimes felt that you were not the person for that job; God had made a mistake. Some of us have felt like that. And yet, as we look more deeply into God's ways with us and know God's principles, we see a wonderful logic in it all. You and I are called for something, laid hold of by God for something, put by God into something, and we feel, God has made a mistake: I am not the person for this, I ought never to have come into this, I have no qualifications for this, I am altogether the wrong peg here! And yet, somehow or other, God does it. He enables you, He carries you through, He accomplishes the work to your own surprise and wonder. As you lay hold of the Holy Spirit, it is done - that is, if you do not sink down into yourself and give up and draw out because of what you are - but you lay hold of the Holy Spirit and you get through and marvel that you have got

through, that the Lord has done this thing through you, through me.

That is very consistent with God's principles, that is no contradiction. It is most consistent with the deepest principles of God. No flesh shall glory in His presence. It is all coming back to Him. God - mark you - elected "the foolish things of the world... the weak things... the things that are not" (1 Cor. 1:27,28). It is the same word; He has elected. It is quite consistent.

Yes, His ways are past finding out. "God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform," but He is consistent with His principles. A life in the Spirit is one succession of confirmations that God is working out a plan. Only rebellion, stubbornness, self-assertiveness and all forms of self-life will hinder or arrest; but a life in the Spirit will be a constant succession of proofs, of evidences, that you were chosen for something. God is not dealing with you just from hand to mouth, piecemeal. It is all worked out. Good works foreordained, "afore prepared, that we should walk in them." If we walk in the Spirit, we walk in afore prepared works; whether we see it or not, it is a fact. But it comes out, wonderfully so, and we have to go down and say, Well, Lord, forgive us for arguing, forgive us for discussing the matter, forgive us for putting over our minds and what we think about it against You: You are wonderful, Lord. And we worship, and that is the proof of election, and you do not want better proof than that. It is all inside of Christ by the Holy Spirit.