



## Articles and Sermons :: The Measure of Christ - Sparks

**The Measure of Christ - Sparks - posted by AbideinHim (), on: 2010/9/2 23:26**

The Church of the Firstborn  
by T. Austin-Sparks

Chapter 4 - The Measure of Christ

Reading: Eph. 4:7,13,15-16; Col. 2:19; Eph. 1:17-19.

You will notice in those verses of Ephesians 4 how the idea of measure is brought into prominence: "According to the measure of the gift of Christ"; "Unto a full-grown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ"; "... may grow up in all things into Him (the Head, Christ)"; "the working in due measure of each several part, maketh the increase of the body unto the building up of itself in love"; and "...maketh increase with the increase of God" (Col. 2:19).

Among the many things set forth by the Levites there are these two: (1) They set forth God's purpose as to fulness for His people, and (2) They set forth the nature of spiritual service. It is those two things which will occupy us at this time.

God's Purpose as to Fulness for His People

There are three ways, it seems, in which the Levites set forth God's purpose concerning the fulness for His people

(a) The Spirit of Sonship

We have seen that the Lord claimed all the firstborn in Israel, and said that in the day that He smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt He took the firstborn of Israel for Himself, and then, later, substituted the tribe of Levi for the firstborn in Israel. So the whole tribe of Levi became representative of the whole house of Israel, and in type became the church of the firstborn ones, to which the apostle refers in Hebrews 12.

The idea of the firstborn implies the truth of sonship, but when we come to look into the matter of sonship in the New Testament we have not, as we know, just an initial or elementary thought of God about His people; we have God's fullest thought about them. We find that sonship is an eternal thought, which links with the fulness of Christ; that is, we are taken back by the Word of God, in this letter to the Ephesians, to that dateless point where, in the counsels of the Godhead, everything was appointed to be the heritage of the Son, and all things were summed up in Christ, and universal fulness was made to centre in Him. Colossians chapter one opens that up very fully. It tells us that in Him were all things created, all things were through Him, by Him, unto Him, "that in all things He might have the pre-eminence". Then upon that we have the statement, "It pleased the Father that in Him all the fulness should dwell." When was that determined? The apostle tells us that it was in those counsels of the Godhead, those counsels which are operating now according to this word, "who worketh all things after the counsel of His own will" (Eph. 1:11). Now you see that, as to Christ, sonship is a very full idea, so full that there is nothing outside of it. It bounds everything.

But in the same eternal counsels which determined that Christ should be the centre and sphere of universal fulness, by divine appointment and undertaking the church, His body, was linked with Him to be "the fulness of Him that filleth all in all"; those are the closing words of Ephesians chapter one.

That means that unto that sonship the church is brought, and so we have a parallel revelation in the New Testament concerning the sonship of believers as God's full thought, and you have this remarkable word at the beginning of this letter, in verse 5: "Having foreordained us unto the adoption as sons by Jesus Christ unto himself". Sonship is not the initial thing in the life of a child of God. The initial thing is birth, and childhood, but in the New Testament sonship is something beyond that, something later. Sonship is something which relates to full growth and maturity, and the adoption of sons is not the same as being born a child of God. That is obvious, for if there is an adoption then it is not a birth, and a birth is not an adoption. They are two different things. We are born (in new birth) children of God; we are adopted sons.

There is an altogether different idea in the New Testament with its background, from the idea which obtains in our own civilization today as to birth and adoption. If a child is born into a family it can never be adopted by its own father, but in the Greek world it was altogether different. A child was born, and was the father's child; but when the child reached his majority, the father adopted that child; that is, gave him position as his son now in responsibility, and that was called the adoption of his own child as a son. It is to this that the Holy Spirit refers, taking up what was understood, of course, by the readers of this letter, that one may be born into the family of God, and not yet be a son. The child has to "grow up into him in all things", and then, in spiritual maturity, be adopted as a son.

The great adoption of the church is yet to be. The day of the adoption is that day to which the apostle refers in Romans 8, which sets forth the fact that when the sons are manifested the creation itself shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption. The creation is "waiting for the manifestation of the sons of God". That word "manifesting" simply means the presenting, as the Greek father presented his son, who has always been his child from birth, and has now come to maturity, as his adopted son. The Greek father would bring his son, in the day of his attaining his majority, and present him to the public as his son now. The great day of the adoption lies ahead, but what lies between the birth and the adoption is growth, a coming to the fulness of Christ.

Now, the church of the firstborn ones is to come to the fulness of Christ, unto its manifestation, the adoption of sons, according to the word that is written: "having foreordained us unto adoption as sons through Jesus Christ unto himself"; and then, following that we have the word, "in whom we have our redemption the forgiveness of sins". Sonship is an eternal thought; the redemption is something in time, which, shall we say, is incidental to the eternal because of the tragedy of what has happened. The redemption is not an eternal thought in the same sense. It is eternal inasmuch as God is eternal, and foreknew and foresaw all things, and made provision before the fall, but it is not a part of His arrangement that there should be a fall and a necessary redemption. Adoption as sons, on the other hand, is a part of His standing arrangement.

The Levites are the firstborn ones. They in type are the church of the firstborn ones. The antitype is that which God is taking out of the nations in this dispensation; and so the apostle says, "Ye are come unto the general assembly and church of the firstborn, whose names are enrolled in heaven". We know what the Lord said of Israel to Pharaoh: "Israel is my son"; "let my son go that he may serve Me"; "If thou wilt not let My son go, I will slay thy son"; and God did it. The thought was God's conception of Israel before their redemption, before the blood was shed, before they were emancipated, before they were really, actually in the place of being His people. It is an eternal thought, it goes back behind everything; then all the rest follows to make it good—redemption, the shedding of blood, the overthrow of the other powers. It is all in relation to securing that thought of God.

Sonship itself implies that God's thought for His people is fulness, not just that they should be born again and that they should be saved, but fulness, and that the fulness of Christ. All His dealings with them are towards that, are unto that. He is seeking by all means to bring Christ into fulness in His own, and bring His own into the fulness of Christ.

#### (b) The Church

The second thing which implies fulness on the part of the Levites as a type is that they represented or set forth the church. They are in type the church of the firstborn, so that we see how with the Levites there comes in that which is the great type of Christ and His own as a church, the church which is His body. The tabernacle, the sanctuary, the habitation of God is Christ and His members, even as this letter says, that we should be a habitation of God through the Spirit.

When you dwell upon the idea of the church in the New Testament and these great designations, these great titles such as the church have become obscured in their pure truth and their divine meaning by many false attachments and associations and wrong ideas as to what the church is, and the word "church" has been brought down to a very low level indeed and the title given to things which God would never own as His church. When you seek to discover God's thought as to what the word "church" really means, you find that the governing thought of God concerning the church is that it shall be to Him the vessel for the display of His fulness: "the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that fills all in all".

When you turn to the Colossian letter, again the same thought is there: "In Him dwells all the fulness... and ye are made full in Him" (Col. 2:9,10). And in that same chapter in verse 19 we read: "holding fast the head". In Ephesians the church is shown to be His body, and all the body increases with the increase of God, and the concluding thought and idea is God's fulness by Christ in and through the church to be ultimately universally displayed. So that when you use the very word "church", if you use it according to God's mind, you think of that vehicle and vessel which is called into being

ng, constituted by God Himself, according to His eternal counsels for the manifestation of His fulness in Christ. Membership of the church implies that, involves that. It means that you and I as members of Christ are called into association with His fulness. God's dealings with us are all with a view to that fulness of Christ being found, as far as it is possible, in individuals, growingly manifested now, and eventually to the utmost bound possible. But it will take all the members making one body to display the entire fulness.

Our thought here at the moment is that the Levites, being in type the church of the firstborn, embody this thought of "the church", which itself is a thought, an idea from God relative to fulness.

#### (c) Heavenliness

Now a third thing connected with fulness in the Levites is that they stood essentially for what was heavenly in the life of God's people. Indeed, we can put that more strongly, and more definitely, and say that they existed to hold the people of God to the truth that they were a heavenly people. They had no inheritance on the earth; they were immediately linked with God, and all that which characterized them and was a part of their function, was entirely heavenly in its nature and its order, so that in the letter to the Hebrews, in referring to the Levitical order of things, the Holy Spirit through the apostle says that these were a pattern of things in heaven. Thus the Levites held everything in the life of God's people in relation to heaven. They set forth in object-forms (by object-lessons, types and symbols) heavenly realities. The letter to the Hebrews was written to show believers in Christ that those symbols and types in the Levitical order were only intended to be like mirrors in which heavenly and spiritual things could be seen reflected. They were intended to be like a glass through which you would look at heavenly things. They were only representations and they have passed; the true heavenly things continue, they abide. The thought is that the Levites represented the heavenliness of God's people.

Now come back to Ephesians, and what have you there? "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in the heavenly places in Christ; according as He has chosen us in Him before the foundation of the world..." (Verses 3-4).

Now remember that is addressed to the church. Literally it says, has blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ. That which has been chosen before the foundation of the world and which has been foreordained unto adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, has been blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies. That is the fulness of God's thought for His own, as a full, comprehensive, utter thought. We have not yet come into all those blessings, not because God has not given them, but because we have not grown up into them. We have not grown up into Him in all things. That is the point of our word, the urge to come to God's thought, the measure of Christ.

What is God's thought? The full measure of Christ, the fulness of the stature of Christ. That is God's thought for us. Let us lay hold of God's thoughts; let us by faith appropriate those thoughts, let us believe in God's thoughts, let us seek to get into line with those thoughts, and take the Holy Spirit and His energies so to form us, and constitute us, that God's thoughts may become living expressions in us. That is His purpose: to bring us to the full measure of Christ.

All that we need to do is to state that as a definite fact, but, mark you, it represents a tremendous responsibility. We cannot talk, and hear about things like that without coming under tremendous responsibility. If this is the revelation of God from heaven in Christ through His Word and to our hearts by the Holy Spirit, then it involves us in very great responsibility. Is it necessary to speak about responsibility? Ought not God's thought for us really to draw out our hearts in unspeakable gratitude and worship? Ought we not to recognise these other words here associated with the calling: "according to the good pleasure of his will", the Lord's delight?

You remember what Joshua and Caleb said when they reported on the land: "If the Lord delight in us he will bring us in". That is only what we have here. Christ is the land of God's fulness, and it is according to the good pleasure of His will that we should come into that fulness.

#### The Nature of Spiritual Service

The nature of service, in a word, is ministering Christ to the increase of the saints. God's only end is that Christ shall be all and in all; that is, that the whole universe shall be filled with Christ in every part. That is God's fixed end. Then service to God relates to His end, His object. There is no real service to God which does not lead on to God's end, and if God's end is Christ— all, and in all— service to God is bounded by this: namely, that it is that which results in an increase of Christ, a growth in Christ, a ministration of Christ. So that from the very first step in the life of a child of God it is a matter of receiving Christ. The apostle puts it this way: "As therefore ye received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in His

m, rooted and built up in Him". It is a matter of receiving Christ. Now God's great aim is to put Christ into things. The devil's great aim is to keep Christ out of things, and he will in every conceivable way seek to do that, even to making believe that Christ has been received when He has not been, in order to divert you and send you off somewhere else before the real thing is done. The thing of paramount importance is that we should be sure that Christ is really in. Once Christ is in, God has got His foothold in relation to His final purpose, but it is that foothold that the enemy is resisting all the time by every means.

It is a question of receiving Christ; not truth, not doctrine, not creed, not tradition, but the Person, the living Person. That is the only hope of glory; "Christ in you, the hope of glory". All ministry is bound up with that, and to God ministry is not ministry at all which does not result in that, that is, which is not an imparting of Christ. And from the point where Christ is first received, ministered in the Holy Ghost, introduced into the being, all ministry is a matter of increasing the measure of Christ, so that spiritual stature, which is the stature of Christ, is increased and developed. That is service.

It is not a case of a lot of work for the Lord or many activities of a Christian character. It all comes down to this: an impartation of Christ Himself, and, mark you, only the Holy Spirit can do that. He is the Spirit of Jesus, and that word means that receiving into us the Holy Spirit is receiving Christ. Only the Holy Spirit can convey Christ. You and I cannot put Christ in anybody; it takes the Holy Ghost to do that; and therefore all our ministry must be in the power of the Holy Spirit, because only so is Christ brought in.

Ministry, service, will be measured by the degree of Christ that we have to minister. To be a minister is to be a minister of Christ, but we want to be careful what we mean by that. Is our thought of a minister, a minister of Christ, that of someone called a minister, and associated with Jesus Christ as a minister? That is not adequate. A minister of Christ is one who ministers Christ, who is able to minister Christ because he has Christ to give, has the Holy Spirit of Christ to impart Christ. Remember that is the object of the church; it is to impart Christ. No professional service can do that.

You remember the woman's son who died in the days of the prophet, and who came to fetch the prophet in her distress. The prophet sent his servant Gehazi, and Gehazi went with the prophet's rod in some professional way: "I am the servant of the great prophet, and I have his rod, the insignia of his office." And Gehazi went in this kind of professional way and put the rod on the child; but nothing happened. There is no magic in what is professional. The woman was not to be satisfied with that. She clung to the prophet, and would have nothing second-hand but only himself, and when he came in what did he do? He spread himself upon that child, hands to his hands, feet to his feet, lips to his lips, in an utter identification of himself with that death, himself being in life, and he literally, by reason of the life in him, lifted that lad, so to speak, out of the grip of death. It was life by the living, and there is no other way.

The church is that which comes into contact with conditions of spiritual death and, because it has the living, risen Lord in it, breaks the power of that death, and delivers there from, and proves the testimony of Jesus, that He it is who lives, and Who became dead, but is alive for evermore. That is the testimony of Jesus.

Now to simplify that, all ministry is the ministry of Christ. Our homes ought to be a scene of that. Ministry is not something to do with platforms and pulpits alone. It is a glorious thing when such really are the instruments of ministering Christ, but that is not the only sphere of ministry. If you have a home in which you have any influence, that home, by your influence, ought to be a place where others receive an increase of Christ; not where they hear a lot of wonderful teaching and truth expounded and interpretations of Scripture given, but where they meet the Lord and go away feeling and knowing that they have an accession of the Lord Jesus in their lives.

So, let us also note, it should be with the individual members of Christ in all contacts. The church is here not as a congregation, but as a spiritual body, and wherever two or three are found in His name there the church is implied, and there can be a ministration of Christ; and there should be.

Are you concerned about ministry? Get rid of your ideas about ministry, if those ideas simply tie you to some line of preaching or teaching, or to having some organised Christian work to do, or some departmental activity in Christian interests. All such ideas must be discarded, and we must say to ourselves: "I am in the ministry, I am called to the ministry, and the ministry is just this—no more and no less—that I have Christ to give, I have something of Christ to give; that I know the Lord in this measure in such a living way that I can pass Him on to others in my own knowledge of Him." Our growing knowledge of the Lord means a growing ministry, and there is no real ministry to God beyond our own personal, living knowledge of the Lord. It is not a case of our knowledge of doctrine and truth, but of our knowledge of the Lord, and ministry is measured by that. You and I should ever be before the Lord in this attitude, that we should never go beyond our own knowledge of the Lord, but that the Lord would keep our personal, living knowledge of Him growing all the time, s

o that there will be the basis, the foundation, the background for a living ministry.

Let us confine our thoughts to that truth as to ministry, that it is the measure of Christ that we have to give; not running about taking meetings, but what of Christ we have got to give; not organised activity, but the measure of Christ that we can impart in the Spirit.

#### The Abiding Law of Death and Resurrection

The last word is this, that for both of these things (that is, to come to God's thought of fulness for His people, and to fulfil spiritual ministry) death and resurrection are an abiding law. In the case of the Levites it is perfectly clear. The thing which was governing their whole course and history was this dual law of death and resurrection; the death on the one hand, and the risen life on the other. The life is in the blood, and the blood is the life. That is the persisting thing, and in other ways the law of death and resurrection is observed in the case of the Levites and their own history is connected with that. In the day that the firstborn in Egypt were smitten with death, the firstborn of Israel were preserved in life through death, and the Levites took up that truth and became the embodiment of it, of life triumphant over death, resurrection from the dead. And so all that they had to do with embodied that double law, death and resurrection. Only by the continuance of that law can we come to the fulness which God has purposed, and can we fulfil that ministry which is an increase of Christ. It means that death has continually to work in the realm of that which is rejected of God, in order to make room for that which is accepted of God. In other words, it is a case of death operating continually to get us out of the way in order to bring Christ in. The increase, the fulness, whether it be in life or in ministry, must ever and always be by the operation of death to all that is of the old creation about us, and resurrection in which only Christ appears. Resurrection implies Christ. God has never raised the old creation. He has, in the death of Christ, crucified it, buried it, and He has never raised it. What He has raised is that which is wholly acceptable to Him.

So it proves. We go into experiences of deep, dark and painful suffering, in which some more of the self-life is slain; some more of our own natural strength of mind and will is brought to the grave; some more of the "I" is put out, and we come up out of that deep experience each time with something more of the Lord, an increase of Christ. So we grow by the law of death and resurrection, the law of the grain of wheat.

Ministry is on that basis. Those who have the greatest measure of Christ and His riches to give are those who have suffered most, because in their suffering, that which was in the way of Christ has been removed; and all suffering is to that end. What a shame that so often we do not allow the suffering to do its work. We either revolt and rebel against it and become bitter, or resist the thought of what it is unto and take the martyr attitude of self-pity. No, God's dealings with us in all suffering are unto an increase of Christ, firstly for our own enlargement, our coming to a greater measure of His fulness, the stature of Christ, and then that we may have more of Christ to give. For ministry this law operates— death and resurrection. It is the way of divine increase.

So let us take God's thought again, the fulness of Christ, and see that His thought is made to govern all His dealings with us. And surely we shall consent, and yield to Him if we truly see that God is working. It may be though haply by the difficult, painful, breaking, grinding way in order to save us from that of ourselves which occupies the place that Christ should occupy. This is so that He in all things might have the pre-eminence, be all and in all, fill all things, and then that others should come into the increase of that ministry, where the members are able to minister Christ. It is a very blessed thing, and this is the way.