

Manhood in Relation to the Lord's Testimony

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of manhood in relation to the Lord's testimony, highlighting the dignity of man, the individuality of man, and the demand for history behind everything.

Scripture: Psalm 139:14, Daniel 10:19, John 18:34, 1 Corinthians 12:17, 2 Corinthians 12:2, Philippians 2:7, Hebrews 2:10, Hebrews 4:15, Revelation 22:16

Topics: "Manhood In Christ", "Total Depravity"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks delves into the concept of 'a man in Christ' as mentioned by the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:2, emphasizing the importance of understanding manhood in relation to the Lord's testimony. He highlights the Divine conception of humanity, its eternal significance in God's thought, and the need to correct faulty ideas about man's total depravity and wonderful creation. The sermon also addresses the balance between individuality and identification with Christ, the uniqueness of each individual in the Body of Christ, and the significance of maintaining personal distinctiveness while being part of the collective Body.

Transcript

Reading: 2 Corinthians 12

In pursuing this matter of life and incorruption, we shall now consider particularly a little phrase used by the Apostle Paul about himself, occurring in 2 Corinthians 12:2: "I know a man in Christ". "A man in Christ." I want to link with that one very small and simple clause, which occurs in different connections at different places. We begin right at the end of the Book of the Revelation.

"I JESUS have sent Mine angel to testify unto you these things for the churches" (Rev. 22:16).

It is just that single clause at the beginning - "I Jesus". Then working backwards, we have

"I JOHN, your brother and partaker with you in the tribulation and kingdom and patience which are in Jesus" (Rev. 1:9).

"Now I PAUL myself entreat you" (2 Cor. 10:1). "Behold, I PAUL say unto you" (Gal. 5:2). "I DANIEL, understood by the books..." (Dan. 9:2).

"I Jesus", "I John", "I Paul", "I Daniel"; and that is not only permitted but evidently inspired by the Holy Spirit, a fact which carries its own significance.

The object of our consideration, then, is "a man in Christ", or manhood in relation to the Lord's testimony.

We have already said that man-hood, or 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 things and replace it with another order - an angelic order or some other conception of His mind as to the inhabitant or occupant of His creation. No, manhood has come to stay. It is of the substance of incorruption, the undying, the permanent, and in God's thought therefore manhood or humanity must take a very high place - higher than the angelic order, so the Scripture makes clear. In the Divine thought, manhood is a very noble thing with a very great and high destiny. Hence God is greatly concerned with our humanity.

The Dignity Of Man In God's Thought

Now in this chapter we shall be largely occupied with the correcting of faulty ideas in order to get at the true. Our ideas about man have become a little confused; there are many defects in our conception of man. Evangelical Christianity has placed a very great deal of emphasis upon the total depravity of man. It is a fundamental doctrine of the Evangelical position. I have nothing to take from that; we can support that quite strongly; but we need to remember that every truth runs so very close to a peril and an error. It is just as true on the other side, that man is a very wonderful creation, "fearfully and wonderfully made" (Psalm 139:14). Humanity is something very, very complex and very wonderful. We are constantly discovering new factors and realms within the human soul, and it is the soul of man which is the very core of humanity. I am not going to embark upon an analysis of the human soul; but are we not sometimes ourselves surprised at what there is in us, all unsuspected, of capability and capacity, of unsuspected forces at work? There are two sides to this matter of humanity, the one, which is perfectly true, man's total depravity; the other, the wonderful dignity of man, the dignity of the human idea in the mind of God; and these two things have somehow got to be balanced, or many other evils will result.

So there is a faulty idea which must be corrected before we can get to the real thought of God about man. Let us be careful.

Our Individuality Not Annihilated By The Cross

Now running closely alongside of what is so often our unbalanced and one-sided conception of man, there is our conception of the meaning of the Cross as to man. 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 in that death, by that Cross, of our sins, but of ourselves, the putting away of one kind of man wholly and utterly; and there is nothing to take from that. That stands, and we can add nothing to it; it is true. But again, there is a very great peril running immediately alongside of that fact. Our individuality is not annihilated by the Cross. We as human beings do not go out in the Cross. The Cross does not destroy our entity. It deals with the basis of our humanity upon which we are living now in relation to Adam, but it does not destroy us, and we have to be very careful how we carry the Cross into realms where it is never supposed to be carried. Some people seem to think that the apprehension of the meaning of the Cross, as our identification with Christ in death and burial, means that somehow or other we have to disappear from the universe and never in any way be seen or known or recognised or felt. There is to be a kind of vacuum between our very existence and this world. We have to walk as - well, not existing at all! The Cross is not

meant to create or minister to asceticism. You can carry this matter into a realm which is wrong. Let me repeat, our personality and our individuality is not touched by the Cross in the way of destroying it. Now you will have to sit down and think about how these things are to be balanced. I am making these statements because we are getting at a very important matter.

Our Individuality Not Lost In The Body Of Christ

Then we must correct another faulty conception. I have referred to the Cross. Now I refer to the Body of Christ. Well, a great truth, a great reality, a wonderful thing, is the Body of Christ. There is nothing that we need to take away from all the revelation and truth and doctrine of the Body of Christ. But we must be very careful how that affects our thoughts, because a false conception of the Body, "the Church, which is His body", may result in our having the idea that individual distinctiveness is destroyed and that we all merge as it were into a general lump; that all the identification of us passes out, and we lose any personal form, in some thing called the Body. Now Paul himself was very careful to point out the fault in any such idea. "If the whole body were an eye... If the whole were hearing..." (1 Cor. 12:17). That was his way of approaching this peril - the peril of supposing that the Body involves generalisation, leading to the loss of individual distinctiveness.

And again we have only to consider our bodies, both inside and out, and we will find that down to the smallest part, the smallest organ, there is something absolutely distinctive. Each has a distinct form and a distinct function, something that belongs to it and is quite distinctive. One of the effects of disease is to destroy the distinctiveness of an organ, so that it loses its own particular and peculiar function and characteristics. That is disease in the human body. We must therefore adjust our minds about this matter of the Body. We confuse INDIVIDUALITY with INDIVIDUALISM, and that is just where we go wrong. Yes, individualism has got to go out; but individuality - never!

Need we pursue that to the creation? Why this vast and inexhaustible variety in God's creation? It is one of the wonders of creation, its endless variety. And yet the whole of creation is interdependent: every branch depends on another branch - the flower on the bee, and the bee on the flower, and so on. This principle is shot through the creation, one form, one department, one organism, being absolutely dependent upon another for the justification of its existence and the realisation of its destiny.

And what is true in the whole creation is peculiarly true in our bodies. When the body is taken as a figure of the Church, it is like that, a vast variety. There is at the same time a wonderful unity, but each part has its distinctiveness of contribution and function, as something which belongs to it, which is indispensable, and this is the argument of Paul to the Corinthians. 'We cannot say that we have no need of this, we cannot dispense with that.' The whole depends upon and demands that, because it is something in itself of value to the Lord.

God's Idea Is A Man

Then there is a further matter that needs to be corrected - a faulty idea that has to do with being a thing rather than a person - and when I say a 'thing', people who bear the designations that I am going to mention will need, of course, to be very forbearing. It is possible for some people to be 'teachers' and 'missionaries' and 'ministers' and 'Christian workers' and 'helpers' - designations, titles - and they become just that: a preacher, a Christian worker, or what not, falling under one or another of the many possible titles or designations. They cease to be persons, and become things, and when you meet them you meet the teacher, you meet the preacher, you meet the minister, you meet the Christian worker. That has in

many cases resulted in wearing special kinds of clothes, both men and women. You meet the minister, the clergyman, the deaconess. You are meeting some THING; it is so easy for us to become a thing, something that belongs to a platform or a class, and that thing wipes out our personality. That is to say, we are not met as persons, and we do not meet people as persons, as men: we meet them as that or that or that - some THING - and this is a faulty conception that needs to be adjusted and corrected, because God's idea is a man. God's idea is not a preacher, not a teacher, a Christian worker, a missionary. God has never yet sent out a MISSIONARY. God has sent out a man and He always sends out a man. If God has His way, He will see to it that it is a man He sends, not a missionary. You understand what I mean. Men with their organizations send out missionaries, send out preachers, send out workers. God always sends out people, and He is very particular that it is people, not things. Occupations can become more than persons, and that is always a danger. The thing with which we are most occupied becomes the thing which veils the person, stands in front of the person.

God Wants Originality

Then again as to the matter of originality. Here is a very important point - and you will recognise that here we are getting more closely to business. This matter of originality - of course it is quite true that there is nothing in itself original. But while that is true as Solomon said, "There is nothing new under the sun" - yet God can do that IN US which makes "all things new". Things may have existed for long, many others may have known and wondered at them, but not until there is a touch of the Divine hand upon our eyes or hearts do they spring into real being for us, and are as though they had never been. We exclaim - "I never saw THAT before!" So it may be with the Word of God which was written centuries ago. It might only have been written today when that touch of God's hand rests upon our eyes. That is what I mean by originality. For all its value it might not have existed at all. But now, from mere existence, things become experience.

How is that? It is not because someone has thrown some new light upon it, but because the Lord has done something. The Lord has done something in us, so that out from the realm of the long-existent there has come something that might never have existed before. There must be something in us which makes everything original. We cannot take these things at their face value, merely as things. We are not supposed to be like tape-recorders. When I speak into the microphone, it all goes on to the tape. Presently, if occasion requires, I can just turn it back and it will all come through again. You would hear my voice and every word that is said, but that is not a personality. It has got it all, all the message, all the truth; in a sense it knows it all, it contains it all; but there is no personality there, and there is no originality there - it is mechanical.

The Lord does not want us to be machines; He wants nothing mechanical, no kind of tape-recording of truth. He wants originality, and originality relates to ourselves and not to our matter. You may have all the information in your notebooks, just as the tape has it; but until it gets somewhere else it is of no use to you - there is no real value about it. It has to get into you, to become you. Something has to happen, so that you are able to say, 'Well, I have all that; I know the words, the phrases, the sentences, the ideas; but I have something much more that has become a part of my being, something on which I live.'

The Principle Of Spiritual Authority

This is the very principle of spiritual authority. When it was said of the Lord that He spoke with authority and not as the scribes (Matt. 7:29), that did not mean that He had more ordinary knowledge than the scribes. Probably they had a great deal more knowledge - school knowledge - than He had. He did not

have the knowledge of the schools. They had all that. Their authority was academic or technical authority. When they made His authority superior to that of the scribes, what they meant was: 'This man is talking out of his experience, he is talking out of what he knows in himself, this is coming from him, not from books; this is not the latest address he has heard, the latest book he has read, not something that has caught on with him, that he has got from someone else, that he thought was a bright idea and developed. No, this is the result of something God has done in him, and it comes from Him.'

This is all getting down to this whole matter of manhood in relation to the testimony of the Lord, a man in Christ.

God Demands History Behind Everything

Now because the Lord is so concerned about this, that we will call the HUMAN factor in His testimony; because this is His own Divine idea, and therefore has in it the element of the incorruptible, that is, that which is to be eternal, because God made man for incorruption and for glory, and that eternal thought is bound up with man: because it is so, HE DEMANDS HISTORY behind everything else. That is, He demands history behind all that we say. If we are giving out truth, if we are teaching or preaching or working or in any way seeking to influence other lives, if we are here in relation to the whole purpose of God in relation to other lives, our part, our place, our influence must have a history behind it. We are not here just to stand as a kind of middle man and to take from a store and pass on to others in that mechanical way, to study up subjects from the Bible and pass them on, retailing Divine products. God demands history behind everything, and only as there is a history will there be a real value. The testimony is constituted not by words, ideas, truths, but by history in relation to them. God is very careful about this and very intent upon it, that you and I shall never go beyond ourselves in truth, that we are never found talking beyond ourselves, because, if only we knew it, we ourselves are the measure of the truth that we are uttering. There is something there behind the truth which gives to that truth its incorruptible nature, that makes that truth living and permanent and effective. It is not the truth itself - it is knowing the truth; the knowing is the knowledge of experience. The real value in all our teaching and speaking and trying, as we say, to further the testimony, to stand for the testimony - I do not know that I like the phraseology, but that is how we talk or what we mean - is that everything has to have spiritual history behind it.

It is, as I have said before, spiritual history which makes authority, and nothing else can make authority. And it is spiritual history which creates originality. Do not forget that originality is essential. Everything has got to begin with us before we can give it to others with any effect or value. The words of the Lord to Pilate might very often be addressed to us: "Sayest thou this of thyself, or did others tell it thee concerning Me?" (John 18:34). "Sayest thou this of thyself?" It has to begin there, it has to come up out of our own history. The fact is that thousands and thousands may have gone the same way as we are going under the hand of God, but for all practical purposes no one might ever have gone this way before. We just cannot live on the experience of others, though there be thousands of them. When God gets us into His hands it is as though no one had ever gone this way before. We are alone in this, this is something original. For us the sense is that no one HAS ever experienced this before, they cannot have done - 'I am the only one who has ever had anything like this!' - and yet thousands have gone this way. You see the point of originality. The Lord makes spiritual experience to be to us as though no one had ever had it before.

"I Jesus." Does it not impress you, that right at the end of the Bible the last utterance of the Lord Jesus, speaking to the churches, should be couched in that Name? Not 'I the Lord', but "I Jesus". You Bible students know quite well that the Name 'Jesus' invariably belongs in the New Testament to Him in the

days of His humiliation. After His exaltation they called Him 'Lord', 'the Lord Jesus', 'the Lord Jesus Christ', 'Jesus Christ our Lord', but when 'Jesus' is used by itself it always in some way relates to, refers back to, His life of humiliation when He took the form of a man. He was "found in fashion as a man" (Phil. 2:7). The word 'fashion' is an interesting word there. It means that in all outward appearance, according to all outward judgments, He was like other men. There is another word used of what He was inside; that was something other. But here He is having taken outwardly the form of a man, and in so doing He took the Name Jesus, the name which was the most common name in Palestine, Jesus, Jeshua; so that Name carries 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 (Heb. 4:15); so that, strangely enough, it could be said of Him that He was made "perfect through sufferings" (Heb. 2:10). "Though He was a Son, yet learned [He] obedience by the things which He suffered" (Heb. 5:8). History was being made in His humanity. It was a man learning. No one will think that I set aside His Deity; yet here is a man, a human being - God incarnate, true, but here in the form of a human being - knowing all about human life, having spiritual history made, out of which, as we have sought to point out so much in these pages, should come those intrinsic values that should be for all the ages of the ages. That was all being done in manhood, and now at last He presents Himself to the churches - "I Jesus" - the sum of spiritual history in a man's life, something completed in humanity.

"I John". Yes, John is permitted to say - on a much smaller scale, it is true - 'What I am writing, what I am going to write, is not just something that has mechanically come to me, but things which our eyes saw, our hands handled, something that has come into vital relationship with ourselves, become a part of us, so that we are now in a position where we are allowed to mention ourselves in relation to the testimony of Jesus.' "I John... for the testimony of Jesus."

And Paul - "I Paul": he is allowed to bring himself into view with the authority of a man who has history behind him. "I know a man... caught up even to the third heaven. And... he... heard unspeakable words" (2 Cor. 12:2-4). 'This has become the substance of my very being. I am not talking to you about abstract truths; I am talking to you about something that has happened to me. I have been taken into it and it has been taken into me. In effect that has become me and I have become it: therefore I am allowed to say "I Paul say unto you".'

Was that not true of Daniel? "O MAN greatly beloved" (Dan.10:19). Not 'O prophet greatly beloved', 'O servant of the Lord greatly beloved', 'O exponent of Divine truth greatly beloved', but "O MAN greatly beloved". "I Daniel": you see the man - it is the man of God, the man in the Lord, the man in Christ.

When I use the word 'man', I am of course speaking of humanity - that includes the woman. It is what God was after. These were all human beings. John was a human being. Paul was a human being. Daniel was a human being. Christ had been a human being; He was a human being plus - the mighty plus of Deity. It is where God makes something of Himself a part of a human life, and in so doing constitutes the testimony of Jesus.

Well, you see what God is after. God is not after making you a Bible teacher, a preacher, a missionary, a Christian worker. Those things may emerge, that may be just a form which the other will take, but before, over and through and after all, it is us, ourselves, that the Lord is after, and therefore He takes infinite pains with us. Do understand that, because you will misunderstand the Lord unless you recognise that. You are after your work all the time, you are after your job, you are after your function; you are troubled about things. The Lord is troubled about YOU, and if the Lord is suspending the things, do not just get

worked up into a terrible state about it and get upset with the Lord. He is after you. He is more concerned with your humanity than with anything else. If He has that in Christ, according to Christ, the other will spontaneously flow. You will not have to don any uniform, take any title or name; you will not have to be called by any particular designation. You will be that, and what does the other matter? It does not matter at all. Oh, let us see the emptiness of names - minister, pastor, teacher and all that - if there is not there the thing that it means. But if that is there then the other is unnecessary.

"I Jesus", and then standing alongside Him as the great Head, "I John", "I Paul", "I Daniel", and 'I' - you may put your name there if this is true.

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