

Persons, Ministries, Functions

by T. Austin-Sparks

The root cause of division in the church is human preferences and the glorification of men, which leads to a failure to apprehend the meaning of union with Christ.

Scripture: John 17:21, 1 Corinthians 1:12, 1 Corinthians 3:3-4, 1 Corinthians 3:12, 1 Corinthians 3:21-22, 1 Corinthians 12:12, 2 Corinthians 5:16, Ephesians 4:3, Colossians 3:11

Topics: "Unity in the Body of Christ", "The Role of Ministries"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks addresses the roots of division within the church, particularly referencing the Corinthian church's struggles with personalities, ministries, and functions. He emphasizes that these divisions stem from a failure to understand the unity found in Christ and the significance of recognizing all forms of ministry as vital to the body of Christ. Sparks warns against the dangers of glorifying individual leaders and ministries, which can lead to disunity and a lack of spiritual growth. He calls for a deeper understanding of our identity in Christ, urging believers to move beyond infantile divisions and embrace the diverse yet unified body of Christ. Ultimately, he challenges the church to prioritize the growth of Christ over personal preferences and biases.

Transcript

In order to deal with the roots of division we must know what and where the roots are. They are only known by their fruits, and are themselves so often unseen or unrecognized. So we must go back to Corinth.

When we look more carefully at that wretched state we find that it resolves itself into divisions over things which really were -- and are -- meant to constitute a glorious unity, but which things were made evils by the miserable spirit of Christians. That in itself is something to take note of. The Bible is full of paradoxes. Things which are at the same time demanded and forbidden by God, things which are of great use against the devil, being used by the devil against God. It is one of the marks of Satan's triumph at the beginning that grand things have been taken into a realm where they are of evil account and serve the devil's ends. Well, what were these things at Corinth which have grown to such dimensions unto this time?

Persons -- Ministries -- Functions

These things were persons, ministries and functions "...each one of you saith... Paul; and... Apollos; and... Cephas; and... Christ" (1 Cor. 1:12; 3:4). "Wherefore let no one glory in men... whether Paul, or Apollos, or

Cephas" (ch. 3:21,22). There was evidently something seriously enough wrong about this personality matter to call forth rebuke and castigation from the apostle. What was the wrong? It is clear from Paul's own admission that these names belonged to men through whom the Corinthians had believed. It would be very natural and unblameworthy if those who owed everything spiritually under Christ to a certain servant of His had a special and very great regard for such a one. Indeed, elsewhere, Paul seemed to use this very fact of his being a spiritual "father" as a ground of appeal for a hearing. So that was not the trouble. The element of human preferences no doubt got near to the cause of rebuke. The preference for a certain kind of man, or his particular ability, style, manner, or matter, has often led to grouping of Christians even in a great convention, and it has not been a far cry to the creating of a group complex from such personalities, nor yet to that forbidden "glorying in man" mentioned above. But when we have said all that can be said regarding such details we have been trivial compared with the great background of it all. We have to remember the great revelation of Jesus Christ which Paul possessed and which governed all his approaches to situations, so that there was nothing trivial or merely "human" or "natural" with him. Paul's mentality was constituted by the one all-overshadowing revelation of the one new-creation Man. While fully recognizing that transformation is a process and conformity to Christ a lifelong business, there were ever present with him -- as shown in all his writings -- two basic factors: one, that in Christ the old disrupted, divided man is wholly put away and has no place, but a wholly new Man, different and corporate is in being, a new creation in very truth where there CANNOT be anything that belongs to the havoc made in man or the race by the devil. In Christ there cannot be Jew and Greek, etc. (Col. 3:11), and the principle must be carried to many more classifications than Paul mentions, seeing that the divisiveness has worked out to such a much more numerous progeny than existed then. "In Christ" there is "one new man", only one, and utterly new.

The other thing with Paul was that there is a point at which any merely natural or human features must definitely end, and that period should be a VERY brief one indeed. He calls it babyhood, and considers its extension beyond a very short time something grotesque and abnormal. The real trouble therefore was the bringing down of otherwise heavenly things to earthly levels, the level of earthly men: "Are ye not men?" and "...walk after the manner of men" (1 Cor. 3:3,4). Even Christ is taken hold of in this way. It may be that those who said, "I am of Christ" thought that to be a degree above the others, and looked down on them as inferior. But they are classed with the rest in this matter of divisions, for Paul comes back with a sounding slap: "Is Christ divided?" Their use of Christ was after the manner of men to give glory to their spiritual (?) flesh. In his second letter Paul touched this at its core. "Wherefore we henceforth know no man after the flesh: even though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now we know him so no more" (2 Cor. 5:16). The death-union with Christ just referred to takes this matter of man's place as such back to the very beginning of the Christian life. So then, these divisions are: --

- a. A mark of failure to apprehend the meaning of union with Christ.
- b. Failure to apprehend the significance of Christ Himself.
- c. Failure to emerge from infant conditions.

It is all a matter of still moving on the line of the first man, Adam; a pulling everything down to that level. "Are ye not men?" means not humans, but as men in the disintegration of mankind, and not the integration of the "one new man". This is the kind of stuff being put upon the foundation of Christ and its doom is foreshown as going up in the flames and smoke of the final judgment of works. Let it be fully recognized that the "wood, hay and stubble" part of Paul's letter (1 Cor. 3:12) is connected with this whole argument

or corrective concerning divisions, and means that to build upon Christ the predilections, preferences, likes, dislikes, natural appraisals, prejudices, partisanships, partialities, etc. of even Christian people is to "be saved: yet so as by fire". This latter solemn warning has usually been used for Gospel purposes, or for "worldly Christians" in a general way, but its use by Paul was specifically related to this matter of disunion by partisanship.

Then we come to the question of ministries. There is every reason to believe that ministry and ministries had a large place in the Corinthian mentality. To read the two letters with this thought uppermost is to be fully convinced of the fact. Indeed, the letters can be said to relate entirely, in the final issue, to the church's ministry. But here again the painful contradiction is found. The very thing that was provided and intended for building was being used for unbuilding; the means for unifying and consolidating was being turned to divide and disintegrate. We shall touch upon only one aspect of this here.

The root weakness and therefore the expressed evil was not only the personal bias, i.e. the bias to persons, but to ministries. There was distinct failure in the matter of recognition of and rejoicing in the value and importance of EVERY form of God-given ministry. The evangelistic bias and preference would reject and criticise the teaching ministry, and probably say, "There is no gospel for the unsaved with him or with them." The teaching bias would take the attitude toward the evangelistic that it was "elementary", "not feeding", etc., and so despise it. Thus you go round the clock to every aspect and emphasis of the whole ministry, and people make ministries the means and ground of divisive groups. This is pernicious in every case! Why do not the Lord's people recognize that what is true of the Body as being one, yet having many members (1 Cor. 12:12), is also true of the ministry; it is one, yet having many aspects. Why say of any, "I (or we) have no need of you"? Then again, is it so inconceivable that the Lord will raise up specific ministries in a corporate way to be complementary to the other things that He is doing? What is the reason for the suspicion and ostracism existing in relation to ministries that the Lord is undoubtedly blessing and using? Let us ask the all-inclusive question regarding this: Is it really, honestly, transparently, and utterly a jealousy that CHRIST shall not lose anything, but rather that He shall have all the increase in spiritual life that is absolutely possible? Is it? Let us test ourselves honestly before God!

If any people in whose spiritual welfare we are interested could really find more of Christ and grow spiritually more fully and quickly in another circle of believers or under another ministry, so that there would be a greater measure of Christ in this world as represented by them, are we willing and happy that they should leave OUR church, mission, group, etc., and go there? Are we really ready for the Lord to deal with ALL that limits Him in us or our connection so that THE DRAW AND THE HOLD IS HIMSELF?

Are we trying to hold up, maintain, and conserve some THING that is not clear, free, open, and adjustable for the ever-growing fullness of Christ? It all amounts to a question of whether the Lord really has sovereignly ordained and determined our ministry. If He has, so long as spiritual principles are not violated, it just must be fulfilled, and "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it"; but let us be sure that it is the gates of hell against which we are warring and not the come-back of a false conception and mentality as to what the Lord is after!

Can we not rejoice in ANYTHING that truly ministers Christ, without an inward reservation born of fear as to how it may affect OUR interests? Let us beware of putting OUR hand upon the ark to preserve it intact. The Lord will only confound us if we do.

When we come to functions, we are only coming to an extension of ministry. While the SPECIFIC ministries are represented by the specific function (not offices) of apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers, the whole Body is brought into view as a ministering Body. Every member is an organ and therefore has a function. Interrelatedness and interdependence are the laws of its ministry, and a vast diversity is in an equally vast unity known as "the unity of the Spirit" or "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit". Thus, the apostle gives much prominence to this great spiritual truth in relation to the impact of the church upon the world, just as did the Lord in John 17. All the strong things said by the apostle about "not discerning the Lord's body", and "destroying the temple of God", etc., are seen to have a corporate aspect, and therefore involve the church in the question of its world-testimony and impact. We just cannot say to any real member of Christ, "We can do without you." Perhaps we would not SAY that, but do we act that? Is ours a negative or a positive attitude? Surely what Paul meant was "We just cannot do without you!" "We must have you!" The need is not to maintain some earthly thing with a Christian title, but for the expression of Christ and His increase.

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