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The Eternal Covenant

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"Christ also loved the church, and gave Himself up for it; that He might sanctify it, having cleansed it by the washing of water with the word, that He might present the church to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:25-27).

One of the greatest needs of our time is to recover the meaning of things with which we are most familiar. We have become so familiar with Christianity that we have lost some of its meaning. It has become a set system, a system of doctrine, and to be a Christian you are supposed to believe certain *things*. You notice that I put the emphasis on the word 'things'! There are certain fixed doctrines which you must believe in order to be a Christian, and Christianity has become a set system of forms. Certain things are the things that Christians do, and they are supposed to do them in a certain way, so that we Christians have got into the habit of doing certain things in a certain way, according to a certain tradition.

We talk about 'going to church' on Sunday, but when we talk like that we do not realise that we are all wrong. You can search your New Testament from beginning to end, but you will never find anything about people 'going to church' on Sunday. The church in the New Testament is not somewhere to which you go, and it is certainly not a building called 'a church'. That is just an example of what I mean. We have got into the habit of talking like that, and acting in a certain way because we are Christians, and so we have lost much of the real meaning of Christian things.

So I repeat that one of the greatest needs of our time is to recover the meaning of things with which we are familiar. On the one side there may be all the Christian things, but on the other side there may be the *meaning* of those things, and these two may be quite separate from one another.

Now, of all these matters of which we need to recover the meaning, perhaps the Lord's Table is the greatest. That is why I have asked you to read those words in the Letter to the Ephesians.

The Lord's Table is the very heart of everything in Christianity, and we must realise that. It is the heart of all the teaching, of the meeting together of God's people, and indeed, the heart of the very life of the people of God, but it has become just something that we do from time to time, and we have very largely lost the meaning of it.

Of course the Lord's Table has many aspects, but what we have read in this chapter of Ephesians brings us to the very heart of all the meanings. The deepest and the most serious aspect is this: it represents the sacred covenant between Christ and His bride.

The most sacred of all the covenants that are in the Bible is that between husband and wife, and the destruction of that union is nothing less than the destruction of one life, of one body. The terms of the sacred covenant are: "They shall be one flesh" (Gen. 2:24) not two people, but one person, and to divide those two people is to separate one body. That is nothing less than the destruction of one life. The most solemn things that God has ever said have been about this particular union.

Now you will see the setting of the words which we have read. They are set in the context of husband and wife, wife and husband, and the Word of God says that that is the union between Christ and His Church. It is the most sacred union, or covenant, that God knows, because it represents the union between Christ and His Church as His bride.

In the first place, it is the expression of Christ's own love. We shall never be able to explain or measure that love! It is the love of God "which passes knowledge", and the union between Christ and His Church is the sacred covenant between Him and His bride.

But not only is it the expression of His love; it is the expression of His sacrifice: "Christ also loved the church, and *gave Himself* for it". You have to read Philippians 2 to understand that! God's Son sacrificed all the glories of heaven, where He was the centre of all the worship and the obedience of the angels. He had the very glory of God before the foundation of the world. But who will ever be able to explain what God's Son had before He ever came into this world? All power was His in heaven, all power to create the world, and He gave it all up and allowed sinful, evil, corrupt man to smite Him, spit in His face, and then to stretch Him on a cross of wood and nail Him there. What a sacrifice! And all for the church, His bride - for you and for me.

This is also the expression of a bond of life, a covenant of life. They understand that better in the East than we do in the West, for when they want to make a covenant, the two people who are going to enter into it take a knife, each uncovers an arm and opens an artery, they let the blood flow into one another's arm, and then they say: 'We are bound by a covenant for life or for death'. One says to the other: 'Where you go I go, in spirit. If anyone hurts you, they hurt me. If anyone does you good, they do me good. We are so much one by this covenant that all that happens to the one, happens to the other. If one suffers, the other suffers. If one rejoices, the other rejoices. We are one in a covenant of life. We are of one blood.' What a lot of the New Testament there is in that! Jesus said: 'This cup is the new covenant: the blood covenant between Me and My bride'.

One more thing. This covenant is the basis of our mutual jealousy for one another. There is no doubt about the Lord's jealousy for His Church! He is jealous with a strong, deep, eternal jealousy. He says: 'If anyone touches you, they touch Me. If anyone helps you, they help Me. I am jealous over you with a great jealousy.' But the covenant has two sides, and it means that we have got to be

jealous for Him. If anyone touches Him we ought to feel it, and I think it is true that if people love the Lord Jesus we feel very happy. This covenant means that we must be very loyal to Him.

Is that what you mean every time you go to the Communion Service? Is that really what the Lord's Table means to you? You see what I mean when I say that we need to recover the meaning of these things!

May the Lord give us a stronger love and jealousy for Himself, so that we are not just Christians by name, but are lovers of the Lord Jesus, bound to Him by ties of an eternal covenant, by the bonds of a marriage love. The Lord help us to come to His Table now with that understanding, and we say to Him, as we take these symbols: 'I am His, and He is mine, for ever.'