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## The Need For Positive Ground

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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*"Certain men... taught, saying, Except ye... ye cannot..."  
"There rose... the sect..., saying, It is necessary..." (Acts 15:1,5).*

"Except ye..." "It is necessary..."

What history of confusion and frustration is bound up with that clause! Here in "Acts" we have the beginning of that history which has reached such immense proportions today. It is the slogan of numerous "Sects", parties, teachings, interpretations, and emphases. Every one of these, either explicitly or implicitly, by positive affirmation or by attitude and implication, says: "Except ye... ye cannot"! It is a barrier to fellowship, less or more. It throws believers into uncertainty, and uncertainty always means weakness, or worse. It was the first and mightiest threat to the Church, and it became the battleground of the unity of God's people. The nature of this contention was that it was, firstly, based upon tradition. That is, there was originally something which had a principle of truth in it, and that *principle*, or *germ*, could have *organically* and *spontaneously* grown into a living spiritual body; but, at some point, had been taken into men's hands and crystallized into a set system and form. It was then handed down (Latin: *trans*, across; *dere*, to give = passed on) in that set form. With the extension of time it had become very hard, and people gave much credit to it on the ground of antiquity. The setness, and fixedness closed and bolted the door to further light, and created biases, prejudices, suspicions, fears, and - in some cases - bitterness and cruelty. It, in its fullest development, hampered and eventually crucified the Lord of Glory. The Jews of Paul's day

were totally incapable of believing that a man could separate himself from their tradition and, at the same time, be devoted to their wellbeing.

But it is not always to a long tradition that the divisive and limiting "Except ye" applies. It can govern any aspect or emphasis of either truth or error. Not least among the limitations of Christ's fullness is the unbalanced state resulting from an over and undue emphasis upon a particular aspect of truth. It may be an aspect which is essential, but if it is out of relation and proportion to all other essential aspects it will sooner or later 'run to seed' and defeat its own ends. So many "Excepts" cut off so much that is truly good and necessary, and close *everything* into their own complexion. What we have said so far is surely enough to indicate that just one expression - "Except ye... ye cannot" can be the cause of deformity, limitation, confusion, and suspicion; to say nothing of exclusion and spiritual superiority, in the body corporate. It therefore becomes necessary for us to get away from what works out as negative ground (although it is so positive with those concerned with it) and seek to be strong on what is positive. In this matter we can snatch and steal the very term from the wrong usage to the right.

### **(1) The Beginning of the Christian Life**

"Except a man be born again he cannot..." (John 3:3,5). That is a categorical imperative. Lest a certain easy acquiescence and agreement is the reaction to the statement in our relating and applying it to those who are obviously and unquestionably the sinners, the 'bad' people, the drunkards, thieves, murderers, drug addicts, and fornicators, let the force of the imperative hit us clean between the eyes: that this imperative was *not first* said to the poor woman taken in adultery, or to the Quisling tax-gatherer, Zaccheus, or to the dying thief, etc; but it was said to the teacher in Israel; a meticulous observer of the law; a Pharisee, the straitest of religious sects; a man who attended all the religious services and joined - conscientiously - in all the traditional ritual of the most religious of nations! The context of this declared necessity shows that by a repeated "How", even such a man was incapable of knowing the essential spiritual principles of the Kingdom of Heaven; hence the force of the "Except" and the "Must". At the very threshold and door of the Kingdom of God any and every man must be as though he were not yet born, and to enter he must be as one newly born. This necessity was repeatedly emphasised by Christ to the Jews and their best representatives, and to His own disciples (see Matthew 18:3). This is very sure ground to begin with; but not only for belief; it is a truth to be "made more sure" by experience! Without that we shall never really be sure of anything. Given that, we shall be in a fairly certain position, like that of the healed blind man - "Whether (this or that) I know not. One thing I (do) know; whereas I was blind, now I see." 'You cannot shake me on that!' 'How?' 'Well, I cannot explain, but the fact, I know.'

### **(2) The Maintenance and Maturing of the Christian Life**

*"Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have not life in yourselves."*

*"How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" (John 6:53,52).*

*"Except ye... ye have not..."*

If it is imperative that a new entity is demanded for entrance into the Kingdom of God *now*, it is equally imperative that such entities shall be sustained and matured. The New Testament is full and emphatic on this matter. In the miracle which led to the statement of the Lord it is clear that He both recognises this necessity and acts supernaturally to meet it. If the new birth is supernatural, so is the

sustenance of the newborn. If we try to grasp either naturally, as did Nicodemus, we shall, as he, be defeated by the "How". The basic mystery was the plight of the Pharisees in John 6, as it was in the Pharisee of John 3. But it is not the method or process that is of primary concern, but the fact. And yet the "How" is answered in the New Testament. Let us first, however, get quite clear on this - that we have *got* to be fed in our new spiritual life for its maintenance as truly as the natural body has to have food. Then, it is as true in the spiritual as in the natural that normality is marked by growth unto maturity. And, finally, that full, abundant, provision is made for this by the Lord, even to twelve baskets' full over. Is it necessary at this point to take time to show that it is *not* normal to be born again and finish there? The whole New Testament is against such an idea or state!

But when we have said that, what of this "How" by which the imperative is answered, and the "Except ye" satisfied?

The superficial answer is - of course - feeding, and feeding on Christ. If many Christians were asked what that means, they would probably answer that it is feeding on His Word. Thus it might resolve itself into reading a 'portion' of the Bible every day. That is very good, and important; but is that what 'feeding' really is? Is it not *what Christ becomes to us through the Word*? Now this is an immense matter, because Christ is so immense, and by this 'feeding' an immense Body has to be brought to full-growth and stand complete in eternity. It is what Paul calls "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ". Here, we can only give an indication of what this feeding is, and it will point to much more.

It is all a matter of

### **What Christ is Made Unto Us**

1 Corinthians 1:30 says: "But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who was made unto us wisdom from God, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption." "Wisdom" here is inclusive. It is really: "Wisdom; both righteousness, sanctification, and redemption". These three things as the provision of the wisdom of God are all that ever man needs to bring him to full-growth and to glory.

What is the wisdom of God as made unto us in His Son? Wisdom is more than the theory of things. We may have a great deal of head knowledge and carry many academic degrees, but at the same time be totally lacking in wisdom. Cleverness is not always wisdom. Wisdom is the know-how to do things. The builder rendered his account for labour, time taken, and materials, but then added 50% for what he called "Knowing how to do it". When God's verdict upon *the entire human race* is that "there is none righteous, no, not one" (Romans 3:10), and when every human effort and recourse to make a single man righteous (that is, to be in right standing with God) has utterly failed, a situation exists which raises an ultimate question of wisdom; the know-how!

That is only the beginning of the problem; it has to do with standing. Then the whole question has to be faced as to condition; the changing of man's state. And finally, there is the big issue of his full and final redemption of spirit, soul and body. A new inner man; a new self-hood; and a glorious, sinless, incorruptible body. You will agree that no human wisdom can know how to do all this. Very well, then: it is here that God's provision in His Son becomes the answer. It is all this that is contained in the Bible that is food for our hearts. The Bible is all about this "Bread of Life come down from heaven" as the Life of the world. And it is here that the great "Except ye" comes in. That challenge comes up again and again very severely in the course of Christian life, especially when we are under

acute pressure. When the reality of sin and righteousness arises because of adversity and trouble. When the Lord allows some severe suffering, and He seems to hide Himself and be silent. When, as in the case of the Bethany sisters, He is called in and stays away, seeming to be unsympathetic. Or when, like the disciples in the storm, He is asleep and seemingly uncaring. Then the accuser is quick and fierce to raise the question of sin and interpret the Lord's ways as His condemnation of us. Or, further on; as we discover really how imperfect we are, and what a long way we have to go to be really like Him; so that the whole question of sanctification lays our heart very low, even unto despair; and when the weakness, infirmities, and breakdown of this mortal body seem to becloud the hope of its redemption; then, what do we feed on? Do we, as is so easy, feed on ourselves, what we are or are not; on the adversities as being the end and the all? Then it is that what Christ is made unto us becomes our wisdom; righteousness, sanctification, and redemption. Wisdom as God's 'know-how'. Righteousness over against our sinfulness. Sanctification as offsetting our falling short. Redemption as assurance that full and final deliverance for spirit, soul and body is assured because already secured in Him.

Oh, that we did feed more upon Him, and, in so doing, progress unto that ultimate!