

A Representation of Christ in Every Place

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Church is a representation of Christ, and its purpose is to bring God and man together in one place, serving the purpose of all that the Church is intended to mean.

Scripture: Matthew 16:16

Topics: "The Church as the Body of Christ", "Corporate Expression of Faith"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that the Church is a representation of Christ in every place, highlighting the importance of local assemblies as the corporate expression of Christ. He explains that while individual salvation is vital, it must be understood within the context of the Church as the Body of Christ, where believers collectively manifest His presence. Sparks warns against individualism and the prevailing church system that limits spiritual growth, urging believers to recognize the Church as the meeting place between God and man. He stresses that the local expression of the Church is essential for embodying God's thoughts and exercising His authority in the world. Ultimately, the sermon calls for a deeper commitment to being part of a living, functioning body of believers to fulfill God's purpose.

Transcript

"And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jonah: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I also say unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:16-18).

"And if he refuse to hear them, tell it unto the church: and if he refuse to hear the church also, let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican" (Matt. 18:17).

"For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20).

"Now ye are the body of Christ, and members each in his part" (1 Cor. 12:27. R.V. MARGIN).

"...being built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief corner stone; in whom each several building, fitly framed together, groweth into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom ye also are builded together for a habitation of God in the Spirit" (Eph. 2:20-22).

"As he is, even so are we in this world" (1 John 4:17).

In continuing our meditation in connection with the spiritual house, I have an emphasis now in my heart which I feel peculiarly to be of the Lord. For quite a few, it will be no new word or truth, but even for such the fresh emphasis may be of the Lord. In any case, they must seek to co-operate in the word of the Lord for those for whom He may specially mean it. Let us, nevertheless, all seek to enter into the word in a new way.

We are looking at some of the major features and purposes of God's spiritual house to which we belong, and the one which is to occupy us now is this, that this spiritual house is here as being a representation of Christ in every place. We have seen that the Church is Christ. He is the Church, He is God's temple, God's dwelling place. It is in Him that we find God. He serves the purpose of all that the Church is intended to mean. The Church is Christ. But now, so far as this world is concerned, the Church is Christ as distributed, though not divided; that is, Christ as in all His members by His Spirit; yet not so many Christs, but remaining one Christ. The Apostle raised the question amongst the Corinthians, as you know - Is Christ divided? - and there is almost a tone of scandal at the very idea that Christ should be divided. He remains one, and He is one, though in so many, and in that oneness of Christ in all His members we have the Church. Men will only find the Lord, where we are concerned, so far as Christ is in us. That is the purpose of the Church.

The Vital Character of the Local Assembly

But now we come to consider the special importance of local corporate expressions of Christ, Christ as represented corporately in every place. It is a well-known and understood thing among us that what the Lord Jesus said as recorded in the Gospels was but the truth in germ form. Because the Spirit was not yet given, He could only speak as in an objective way, putting things in a figurative form or in an undeveloped way. All that is in the Gospels is like that, awaiting the day of the Spirit's dwelling within believers so that the much larger meaning contained in His utterances might be imparted. And, amongst all the rest, there is this fragment which we have read in Matt. 18:20 - "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." We shall lose a very great deal if we take that simply as it stands in the Gospel. It was never intended to be taken just in that form. In the later revelation of the Holy Spirit, that passage, with all others, is taken up and its earlier meaning is made clear, and what we have as the fuller revelation is this, that Christ is peculiarly present when two or three are gathered together, because He has committed Himself to His Body. To put that round the other way, it is the Body of Christ which is necessary for the bringing in of the fullness of Christ. "The body," says the Apostle, "is not one member, but many" (1 Cor. 12:14). But then the same Apostle says, "Ye are the body of Christ" (1 Cor. 12:27), and he is speaking of a local company. Christ is peculiarly present when it is a corporate expression. The Lord has bound Himself up with His Church for manifestation. It may be true that the Lord is in us individually: it is true; and it may equally be true that the Lord, as in us individually, will express Himself in us and through us as individuals, but the Lord is limited, and very severely limited, when it is only an individual matter. His thought is otherwise, and so He makes this statement. He might have left a thing like this unsaid. It would seem to have been quite unnecessary, quite beside the mark. But no, He said it, and when He has said a thing, it means something. Indeed, it bears all the significance of such a One as He is having said it. That means it carries tremendous weight if He says it; and He has said this thing in these precise words - "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." He might have said, Wherever there is one in My Name, there am I! Well, that is true, but the Lord did not put it in that way: and you notice that He is dealing with practical matters. He has used the word "Church." Certain people have to be dealt with by the Church, and when the Church deals with them, it is the Lord. That is

what He is saying.

You must bring these two things together. Here is someone guilty of remissness in spiritual life. Well, someone go and tell him, and if he does not hear, take one or two more, and if he refuse to hear them, tell it to the Church. "If he refuse to hear the Church also, let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican. Verily I say unto you, What things soever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and what things soever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again I say unto you, that if two of you shall agree on earth as touching anything that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father who is in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." The Lord is in the midst in an executive way in the Church's administration, where two or three are gathered together. I am not going to deal with that phase of Church functioning, but I use it to bring out this principle, that there is a specific value bound up with a corporate expression of Christ, and a value of very great importance.

Some Fatal Hindrances to God's Purpose

(a) Individualism

Now, let me stop here for a parenthesis. There are some fatal mistakes into which Christians have fallen, and one of these is the principle of the individual line in the place of the corporate. I say that has been a fatal mistake. It has been fatal to spiritual growth, fatal to spiritual fullness, to spiritual power, to spiritual light and to spiritual life. There are many Christians who are only concerned with individuals. Concern for the individual is of course right, but the Lord only saves the individual with the Church in view, with the corporate Body in mind. We must settle it and be very clear that this dispensation, from the ascension and exaltation of Christ, and the giving of the Holy Spirit, to the taking away of the Church at the end, is marked out by God as the period in all the periods of this world's history for securing, not individuals as so many saved men and women, but a one Body - the Church. Individuals only figure before God in the light of the Church, the one Body, and, if you and I fail to recognize that as the governing law of God's dealings with men in this dispensation, we are going to forfeit a great measure of what the Lord intended for us; limit and straiten our spiritual lives and experiences, and cause weakness in the very work of God itself.

I hope you have understood that. It is of very great importance that we should settle this. You will notice that these two things usually go together. It is the salvation of the individual that engages and occupies so many, and when they have got the individual saved, brought to the Lord, they have no further concern but to go and get more individuals and bring them into salvation. Those two things go together, individualism and salvation in its merely initial sense of souls being brought to the Lord. After that, there is no more. That has proved a fatal thing in the history of God's interests, and today we are finding it to be one of the things which is representing the greatest difficulty to Christians themselves and to any fuller work of God. I mean this, that you everywhere meet a large number of people who have just gone that far. All that they have is just their own personal salvation, in the sense of forgiveness of sins, peace with God, those rudiments of the Gospel, and they have been there ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty years; and today as you meet them and speak with them, you come up against one of two things.

On the one hand, there is an utter inability now to apprehend anything more than the simple elements of salvation; they have not got ability to do it. All those spiritual senses and faculties which ought to have been developed so that they could receive much larger and fuller revelation from God have been stunted, have never been developed by exercise, and in spiritual faculties they remain simply infants after all these

years. I am only giving you the Scripture in saying that. You know, Paul had to say that very thing to the Corinthians - "I could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, as unto babes in Christ. I fed you with milk, not with meat." To the Hebrews it was the same: "When by reason of the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need again that someone teach you the rudiments of the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk... solid food is for fullgrown men, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern good and evil." Paul had to deplore in his own day that there had been this fatal arrest and he said, in effect, Here I am, just full of Divine light for you, and I have to keep back all this that God has given me for His Church because of that! I say that is fatal for the Church - that the Lord should give abundant revelation for His Church's growth and fullness and functioning, and that there should be, after years and years and years, such a state that people are totally incapable in themselves of receiving it, understanding it. You meet that condition today everywhere. They cannot, after so long a time.

On the other hand, of course, you find those who after a lifetime turn to you and say, Oh, that I had known this before! Oh, that I had been told this before! Oh, that I had had this years ago! Why not? It has been here all the time. It is because of this fatal individualistic line. For the greater part, the work of God since the early days of the Church, with the exception of very small things here and there, has been just on this line of getting individuals saved and leaving them there. It is fatal in the long run to all that God intended; and then people come up against the fact that it is so. Oh, that I had known it long ago! Well then, while the individual is very important, and has to be dealt with in the light of the other as an individual, we must note that, if the individual is put in the place of the corporate, nothing but the most sorrowful consequences can follow. That is one fatal mistake.

(b) The Prevailing "Church System"

Another fatal thing is that which is represented by the present "Church system." The present system which obtains in the largest realm is almost entirely a matter of congregations and preaching places, places where people gather together or congregate in a religious way - yes, maybe an evangelical way, yet but congregations - and they come together to go through a certain rota and, in the main, to hear something preached, and they go away. Now, while there are variations and degrees in that system, that very largely is the position: and that is not a corporate expression of Christ. That is a congregation. That is not a body. That is not the Body locally expressed and functioning. It is something less. What is the result? The same result as in the other case, namely, very little spiritual growth. I am being very frank now. I want to talk out of my heart because I feel the Lord wants to get us somewhere in this hour on this matter, and I must run the risk of treading upon sensibilities in order to get there. The result spiritually in this second instance is very largely the same as in the other case of the merely individualistic, and we are everywhere finding people today in that present Church system who have not a glimmer of light on the Lord's fuller purpose and do not know what you are talking about: and multitudes of them have no interest in anything else. This thing, this going to church, this congregation, this going through a rota, this place of the public worship line of things has come into the place of the true local expression of the Body of Christ, and has set that aside. Today, speaking of the Church in that sense, it is the Church like that which is in a state of terrible spiritual infancy and immaturity and unenlightenment after all these centuries, and people born and brought up in it do not grow spiritually. I know there are some who do grow despite it, but I am speaking of the thing itself. It has become a fatal menace to the real purpose of God.

(c) The Making of "The Gospel Mission" to be Everything

Now, there is a third thing, and that is "The Gospel Mission," which also takes the place of the local church as spiritually formed. Now, this is no denunciation of Gospel Missions, and I am not saying that Gospel Missions ought not to be. I am far, very far from saying that. I am, of course, not speaking now of those evangelistic missions that are held among the churches from time to time, but of that which has assumed the character of a permanent institution in numerous places. If then you take the Gospel Mission and have that as though it were everything that there is, and you remain satisfied just to go to the Gospel Mission where the Gospel is preached to the unsaved, and keep on the Gospel Mission line of things; well, you are simply dwarfing your own spiritual life. It is a thing which has in multitudes of cases just become a substitute for the spiritually formed local expression of Christ. Christ is much more than that, and you note that the people who live all their lives in the Gospel Mission are the people who are most terribly immature, spiritually ignorant and unenlightened. Oh yes, rejoicing in Christ as their Saviour - I do not question that - glorying in personal salvation; but oh, where is vocation, where is the fullness of Christ, where is God's eternal purpose being worked out? Not there. That just goes one step, and one step is not the whole road to God's end. Let there be these things, but let them be as auxiliaries to the fuller thought of God, as instrumentalities of the Church, and let them not be the whole thing. If they are, they will fatally affect the life of God's people and spiritual progress.

You see, the difference is this. Take a bunch of flowers, a bunch of roses or any other particular kind of flower. They are of the same species, and they have the same life in them. That is a congregation, not a body! The difference between a bunch of flowers which are all alike, all sharing the same life, and the root and the plant, is a very big one. Give me the rose, root and plant or bush, and what shall I have? Well, I shall have this difference that, whereas the bunch of flowers has the life, it just goes so far. That is all and there it ends. It will never go beyond that. Give me the plant or bush, and it will grow. It may pass through a paroxysm of death for a season, but next year it will come back again and there will be more; and then another experience of dying and resurrection, and again there will be more, all in the same plant. That is a body, that is an organism, not a bunch. And that is the difference between a congregation, so many Christians, units coming together as units, and a spiritual organism, a local expression of the Body of Christ: and it is the Body which is God's thought, not a congregation, not the bunch of flowers. But oh, the Lord's people are so much like the bunch of flowers! It is true they are all of the same species: they are Christians, they are children of God, they are all sharing the same life, but oh, they are not there as one organism in one place growing with the increase of God, passing through corporate convulsions of death and resurrection and making spiritual increase in that way. What I have said about the present system and the missions is just like a bunch of flowers. Yes, they belong to the Lord, and they have the same life, they are all the Lord's children; but they just come to a certain point and they never go beyond that. That is true. I have had enough experience to make me sure it is true. Alas, many of them do not want to go any further, and many of them resent the suggestion that it is necessary to go any further. However, that is not God's thought about it. God's thought is of the root and the plant as a whole, a living organism here and there as representing and expressing Christ Himself. The plant grows and makes increase. The bunch simply goes so far and then it stops.

Now, Satan is not adverse to meetings as such, but Satan is adverse to local families, local expressions of the Body of Christ. Hence you have the great history of Satan's persistent effort to scatter the children of God and break up their corporate life, to bring an end to their practical functioning together.

The Purpose and Function of the Church, as also of its Local Expression

So we have to see exactly what the purpose and the function of a local expression of the Body or the Church or House of God really is, and we can see it if we look at the type that leads to the antitype. What the temple of old was in figure, the Church is in spiritual reality, and what the Church is in spiritual reality as a whole, the local company is to be. It is remarkable that local churches in the New Testament are always viewed in the light of the whole Body. Thus Paul will say to the local church at Corinth, "Ye are the body of Christ." Now, it would not do for Corinth to take hold of that and say, You see, WE are the Body of Christ! That would be giving a wrong meaning to it. The point in the inspired declaration is this, that every local company is in representation what the whole Body is: what the whole Body is in God's thought is to be seen here and there and there.

(1) The Meeting Place Between God and Man

Now we continue by way of analogy from the temple. What was the temple? In the first place, the temple of old was the meeting place between God and man. That is the first function of the temple, of the House of God. Christ was that in the fullest sense, in a far greater sense than was ever [the] temple of old. Here is Son of Man and Son of God blended in one Person. It is tremendously significant that in Matthew 16 that very fact comes to light. Christ, interrogating His disciples, uses one term, and, in getting the Divinely-inspired response through Peter, the other term is used. "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" Peter said, "Thou art the Son of the living God." "Son of man," "Son of God": and that is by revelation of God. Here is God and Man met together in one Person, in one place. And of Himself the Lord Jesus later said, Destroy this temple, this sanctuary, and in three days I will raise it up again. Carnally minded Jews thought He was speaking of that material temple, but He was speaking of Himself, His own body. This temple - transition of thought from the temple in Jerusalem to Christ personally, the meeting place of God and man - that is Christ.

Now Christ corporately expressed is the Church according to revelation in the New Testament, and therefore where Christ is corporately found in representation, and livingly functioning, there God should be met with, there God and man should come into a peculiar touch and relationship. The testimony of all who come into such a realm where Christ is really corporately expressed ought to be, I find the Lord there! and that ought to be enough. That is the answer. Do you find the Lord there? Does the Lord meet with you there? Ah, that is the first governing thing, and not other questions associated with gathering together or congregations; no, the Lord Himself, and that not now as a personal thing between myself and the Lord, seeing that I, personally can have touch with the Lord anywhere, but now as a matter of the Church. Do I meet the Lord in the midst of that people? If so, I have come into the realm where God's thought is having expression: and that is a realm of tremendous possibilities.

Have you read that little book by A. J. Gordon, "How Christ came to Church"? It might do you good to read it, though rather perhaps from an objective or outside point of view. But let me tell you as quickly as I can the content. Dr. Gordon one Saturday was sitting preparing his sermon for the following day in his study, when he fell asleep: and he dreamt that he was in his own church and in his pulpit on the Lord's day. His was a very fine church with its Gothic pillars and arches. The church was crowded, and he was in the pulpit about to commence the service, when the door opened at the back and a stranger entered and walked down the aisle looking from side to side for a seat. As he got nearer the front, someone stepped out and showed him a vacant seat. Dr. Gordon goes on to describe how he went on with the service, and how his eyes constantly turned to that stranger. If he looked in some other way, he found his eyes coming back to him. Dr. Gordon said, "I registered the resolve that I would go down to speak to the stranger after the service." After it was over, and without showing noticeable hurry, he just as quickly as he could made

his way down and tried to intercept the stranger, but before he reached the door, the stranger was gone. With great disappointment, he said to the man at the door, Do you know who that stranger was you let in this morning? The man at the door said, Don't you know who that was? That was Jesus of Nazareth. Oh, said Dr. Gordon, why did you not detain Him? I would love to have spoken to Him. Oh, said the man, do not worry: He was here today, He will come again. (Well, as an aside, that double reply bore fruit in two volumes from Dr. Gordon's pen; the one on "The Work of the Holy Spirit," and the other on "The Coming of the Lord.")

Dr. Gordon says he went away with these musings - Jesus of Nazareth has been in my church today. What was I saying? I was talking about Him. How did I talk about Him? Did He discern in anything that I was saying the faintest tinge of unreality? Did I speak of Him, not knowing He was present, as I would have if I had known? What did He think of my manner, my matter, my conducting of the service? What did He think about our choir, our singing. It was all about Him, but was it worthy of Him? I wonder what He thought about our Gothic building?

That is the story in brief. But what has come to me is this: Is that our conception of things? You see, in that the suggestion is that the Church is one thing and Christ another, and that the Church can be in all sorts of respects certain things, and Christ quite another. Oh no, that is not God's Church. God's Church is Christ, and where you find the Church according to God, there you find Christ, and no disparities, no inconsistencies, contradictions: it is the Lord. All the other is not Christ at all. The Church is Christ, and if it is Christ who is pre-eminent when the Lord's people come together, God is there Himself. It is on the ground of Christ and Christ's presence that men meet with God. You know as well as I do that men cannot meet with God in us as we are. We cannot of ourselves bring men into touch with God. No priesthood as such can bring men to God. But if the Lord Jesus is in us and we can bring men into touch with the Lord Jesus we have brought them into touch with God. But if He is not there in us either personally or collectively, we may talk about God till Doomsday, but men will not meet Him. That is what the Church is when truly constituted. It is the ground upon which men meet God and God meets men, and that ground is Christ Himself; and there is peculiar and special value and significance bound up with this corporate expression of Christ in the matter of men meeting God. I believe that a far greater impact of the Lord can be registered upon men by a company of Christ-indwelt men and women being together in the power of the Holy Spirit than can be by any number of isolated Christian units. A meeting-place between God and man, the vehicle of Divine life.

You see Ezekiel's temple. The house is now finished according to God's mind, and it is out from the house, down the steps, the river flows, deepening and widening on its way, and wheresoever the river cometh everything lives. Trees are seen on either bank and everything is living, until at length it empties itself into the Dead Sea; and even that death is swallowed up in the life that is out from the sanctuary. It is this corporate expression of Christ, the Church, from which there is the ministration of God's life to men, and that is why the enemy wants to break it up. That was our point in our previous meditation. The scattering or dividing of the Lord's people, the making of the Lord's people into so many individuals and units alone, without a real corporate life, is a strategical move on the part of the enemy against that life. We know in our own experience that, if the enemy can get in between even two of us to set us apart in spirit, our life is under arrest and the river is not released until we mend that bridge, heal that division. That is very significant. The enemy is after that sort of thing. He is against the life, because the Church is the vehicle of God's life.

(2) The Embodiment and Expression of God's Thoughts

Then again, the temple was the embodiment and expression of God's thoughts. Every stone, everything used, all size, dimensions and measurements, materials, they all represented some thought of God. God's mind was expressed in all. It was a symbol of a spiritual attribute. Peter, following up that word which is before us - "a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:5) says a little later that the object of the spiritual house is to "show forth the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light." The temple was to show forth the excellencies of the Lord, the embodiment of Divine thoughts, and the Lord's people in any place should be the embodiment and expression of Divine thoughts. There should be there a disclosing of God's thoughts in a very blessed way, a coming to know the mind of the Lord for His people, a rich unveiling of what is in the heart of God concerning His own. That is how it ought to be: not just addresses or sermons, but a ministry of revelation under the Holy Spirit through an opened heaven. That is of value to the Lord and to His people. But it wants a living company for that: and oh, how we know it! Sometimes we are not all alive to the Lord for some reason or other when we come together. Perhaps we are tired, or have been bothered, something has come in to cast down, and although the Lord has prepared for us some rich feast, something He wants to make known, He cannot; He is held back, and there is just a state of lifelessness. But let us come together in the Spirit, alive unto the Lord, and the Lord's thoughts come out and they flow. The condition of the company of the Lord's people very largely determines what kind of time we have. It very largely depends upon us how much the Lord can give us. The company of the Lord's people is to be the expression and embodiment of God's thoughts. That is what it exists for.

(3) The Sphere of Divine Government and Authority

Then the temple was the place of God's government. Things were brought there to be decided upon, to be judged: and Peter says, "Judgment must begin at the house of God"; and that is Matt. 18 again. Tell it to the Church, let the Church decide on this. It is the place of Divine government. I cannot stay with that but you see that the corporate company, livingly constituted according to Christ, is of very real and practical consequence to God in this world now: and oh, how important it is for life's sake, for light's sake, for power's sake, that we all be consciously and livingly a part of such a local expression of God.

I do want to say this to you from my heart, that it is necessary for you, dear friends, to be a part of, to be in the midst of, to have behind you, a living, functioning company of the Lord's people on this basis. I know the difference, and many of you know the difference, the difference it makes in depth, in strength. For many years, I was a minister, as we say, of different churches, congregations; but oh, I know the difference between that and what has obtained since. It is not a difference of the natural calibre of the people at all, but a difference in kind. The one was a part of a system largely organized and run by man for religious purposes: the other is something formed of the Spirit; and that is an immense difference. I know the difference when I meet things. All you can say is that those who have a living local company of the Lord's people of whom they are a part, have something that other people have not. There is measure about them. There is something about them that is more than you will find in the other things of which I have spoken, where it is purely individualistic or formal. It is very important. The Church is intended to be this, and a thing can only know its Divinely appointed resources as it functions according to God's intention. If therefore we are called for this as the Church, then we must be the Church in order to fulfil our great purpose and know our great fullness. I do ask you to think about this very seriously. It is a thing of no little importance, is this matter of the local fellowship of the Lord's people.

I know it may raise problems for some of you. "There is nothing in our neighbourhood and I do not know how it is possible." But there is an answer, and the answer is a simple one, although it may test you. If this

is God's mind, you go to the Lord about it. 'Lord, if this is your mind, either bring me into such a thing or bring about such a thing where I am.' Hold on to the Lord for that. Brother Nee, when he was here, speaking about this matter and talking with one and another about it, spoke of how in one place this very thing arose between someone and the Lord, and how that one held on to the Lord for several years over the matter; and then how that, after holding on for so long, gradually the formation commenced, a second being joined to the first, and then a third, and then another. But they were greatly exercised for a long time, standing themselves into the meaning and value of God's thought and holding on to Him for it to find expression and become a reality. You see, that is just it. That is our ministry; through prayer to bring into being what God intends. If we can be put off easily, well then, we have not seen the vision, the thing has not gone very deep. That is only said by way of helping with the problem that arises. Let us be exercised about the Church and let the Church be of greater importance to us than the problem, then I think we shall find a way through.

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