

Explanation of the Nature and History of 'This Ministry'

by T. Austin-Sparks

T. Austin-Sparks explores the nature and history of his ministry, emphasizing the significance of the Cross and the importance of personal experience in spiritual growth.

Topics: "The Cross", "The Church as the Body of Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks addresses the nature and history of his ministry, emphasizing its growth and the need for clarity amidst misunderstandings. He highlights that the ministry is rooted in the experiences and spiritual needs of God's people, rather than mere doctrinal teachings. Sparks explains the significance of the Cross, not only for salvation but also for a deeper understanding of self and life in the Spirit, which leads to a transformative experience for believers. He stresses the importance of the Church as the Body of Christ, advocating for unity and a return to the foundational principles of faith. Ultimately, he calls for a deeper engagement with the fullness of Christ and the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Church.

Transcript

With the expanding and strengthening of this ministry there is an increasing enquiry and request for some concise statement as to its spiritual history and nature. This need seems also to be accentuated by a growing misunderstanding and misrepresentation of it. Under considerable pressure, therefore, and with the desire to help all concerned, I am seeking, in as small a compass as possible, to make available this explanation.

"A Witness and a Testimony" is a small paper in which we seek to minister to the Lord's people every second month such spiritual food, light, and instruction as He gives. At the time of writing, the paper is nearing the end of its thirty-third year of issue. Very much ground has been covered in that extended period, and what we write here can be but a very brief intimation of the main features of the ministry.

Behind the written and printed ministry there is a body of people which has grown from a small company to a very considerable family. This is true locally and world-wide. Most of what has been published has first been given in spoken ministry, either to the local company or in the periodic conferences held usually five times each year. Some books, however, have been written direct.

It is necessary to say this, because we want it to be understood that everything is vitally related to the actual and growing need of the spiritual life of a representative body of God's people. Indeed, it is the people who have made it necessary, given meaning to it, and drawn it out. This is surely God's way of giving! This, then, is not just booky, cloistered, or studied matter, but ever the call and answer of living conditions.

During the years there have been changes and developments in measure and form, in emphasis and presentation, as there should ever be where there is life and growth, provided that the essential foundation remains true and unchanging. Adjustableness in the presence of fuller light or better understanding is an essential to true and proper growth, and we have ever sought this grace, and shall seek it to the end. It is not for us to speak of the appreciation which has grown and been given such wide expression, but we may speak of the help which we have received from the Lord and by which we have been enabled to continue to this day. When we say that, we say very much, for, had it not been so, we could not possibly have survived the many-sided effort of Satan to end this ministry, and the so great antagonism of many who have thought that they were doing God service in opposing it and us.

Before proceeding to outline the message, may I make this further emphasis. It is not truth in any merely technical or doctrinal sense that we are wanting to propagate. We can truly say with Paul, although now only in a secondary sense (that is, through the Scriptures), "I received it not from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through revelation of Jesus Christ." It has been by being taken into deep and painful experiences that we have come to see God's Son in the greater fulnesses of His significance, and that we can truly say that every fresh ray of living light has been born out of dark and bitter travail. So we would have it; for if there is one thing more than another from which we would be saved, it is from having our teaching not in vital relation to our experience. God forbid that we should ever decline into a mere 'teaching'! We desire to know no more truth than is experimental. It is an axiom or fixed principle that spiritual and eternal values can only be ministered as they have proved to be living power in those who minister. We can only comfort others with the comfort wherewith we ourselves have been comforted of God. Others can only really be helped by what has been the power of life in the would-be helper. Information, by itself, however correct and orthodox, however strongly held in conviction and passed on in passion, will lack an essential and indispensable quality or value for spiritual constitution. Hence it has ever been God's way to raise up a vessel, personal or corporate, in which His message has been wrought by fiery ordeal. The messenger must not only have the message in him, but he must be in the message: not only in mind and feeling, but in experience and being.

This being the way of life, in setting forth the nature and content of this particular ministry I shall follow the course of our own spiritual history and growth, rather than work backward from the present position. As we have said, the various books which have come into being through the years have been but the expression of the progressive and many-sided emphasis in our hearts, and these embody the history of God's dealings with us in experience and illumination. Their value will only lie in their being able to touch the Lord's people at that point of experience and need which was the occasion of their being produced. Unless there is such felt need, they will be nothing more than words.

No one should imagine that we think of what follows here as a 'special revelation', or regard our experience as unique. We positively repudiate the charge that we claim to have a special revelation. Nothing that we may set forth is new in itself, but all of it can be found in the Word of God. It is only new as things are new when they come with all the impact of a revelation to those concerned, although others may have seen them long before. It is not the things in themselves, but the power and life with which they

break upon us as if by revelation, that constitutes a ministry. Therefore, no one will expect to find here a new 'revelation', but it may be that what is here will come to some - as it came to us - like a new revelation. (In using the plural, 'we' and 'us', in this statement, I refer to the company, here and scattered world-wide, of whom I know these things to be true.)

It was after years of Bible teaching, evangelical ministry, missionary enterprise, and varied Christian activities that the Lord brought us, in His own effective way, to see, as we had not seen before -

The Fuller Meaning Of The Cross

This was the first stage in an altogether new life under an open Heaven. As we came to see subsequently, the Cross (or its type - the Altar) was ever God's new starting-point in the realization of His full thought. Starting-point, we say; for Calvary is not an end in itself, but the beginning of everything. As to the objective meaning of the Cross, there was no need for any adjustment. The great values of the Lamb slain, as related to the first stage or phase of Christian experience, were there, thank God. Deliverance from the judgment resting upon the world; deliverance from condemnation and death; deliverance from the tyranny or the bondage of an evil conscience - all in virtue of the righteousness which is by faith in that Righteous One who offered Himself without spot to God for us: this was where we stood, by His grace. What Christ by His Cross was and is for us was our anchor-ground. The apprehension and appreciation of all that has never ceased to grow, and is deeper, fuller, stronger to-day than ever.

Moreover, we know quite well that this basic position is an object of Satan's unending assault and bitter antagonism. And it will be so to the last. He knows quite well that everything else is jeopardized and frustrated if he can shake a believer's position as to what Christ is for him or her. Who is of any use to God or men, in eternal values, who is not settled as to his or her acceptance in the Beloved? Who can count in any realm spiritually who has not a settled assurance that in Christ Jesus they are accounted righteous, whatever they may be in themselves? Every fiery dart of the evil one will get home if the breastplate of righteousness and the shield of this faith is not firmly apprehended and appropriated. Yes, the objective meaning of Calvary - Christ crucified - is of unspeakable importance in the matter of a believer's standing, and we can never cease to keep this in full view and hammer it home.

But, when we have taken account of this and have it well settled, it may only relate to deliverance from "Egypt". For it is clear that all that we have said and referred to so far is connected with 'translation' (or transference) out of the power of darkness into the Kingdom of the Son of God's love. It was a mighty thing that happened in Egypt, in virtue of the slain Lamb and shed and sprinkled blood, and it had abiding elements and values. But there was much more needed. While an outward bondage was destroyed, that is, the bondage which meant being involved in the doom of the world, there still remained an inward bondage. Israel in the wilderness represents the dominion of the natural life, the self-life, the "flesh". God's people, yes! Redeemed, yes! In the Kingdom, yes! Heirs of promise, yes! But not getting very far; ineffective, unfruitful, up-and-down and round-about: and always at the mercy of the life of sense. They even, sometimes, imagined that they might have a better time back in Egypt. A strangely contradictory state for those who, in their better moments, were so sure that they had been redeemed by God! This wilderness life represented much expenditure of energy, much laborious effort, much longing and aspiration, much service and much religious devotion and activity, but it never got through, and it was one big circle, coming back, in effect, to where they were before.

Well, it was at some such point that the fuller meaning of the Cross was made to break upon our greater need. It is a part of the nature of things that we never learn in a vital way by information. We really only come into the good of things by being "pressed out of measure". So the Lord has to take much time to make spiritual history. When at length our eyes are open, we cry, O, why did I not see it before! But everything else had to prove insufficient before we could really be shown, and that takes time. Thus it was that we were turned in that dark hour to Romans chapter six, and, almost as though He spoke in audible language, the Lord said: 'When I died, you died. When I went to the Cross I not only took your sins, but I took you. When I took you, I not only took you as the sinner that you might regard yourself to be, but I took you as being all that you are by nature; your good (?) as your bad; your abilities as well as your disabilities; yes, every resource of yours. I took you as a "worker", a "preacher", an organizer! My Cross means that not even for Me can you be or do anything out from yourself, but if there is to be anything at all it must be out from Me, and that means a life of absolute dependence and faith.'

At this point, therefore, we awoke to the fundamental principle of our Lord's own life while here, and it became the law of everything for us from that time. That principle was: "nothing of (out from) Himself", but "all things of (out from) God".

The Son can do nothing of (out from) Himself, but what He seeth the Father doing: for what things soever He doeth, then the Son also doeth in like manner' (John 5:19).

"I can of Myself do nothing: as I hear judge" (John 5:30).

"My teaching is not Mine, but His that sent Me" (John 7:16).

We saw that this explains so many strange and - naturally - perplexing things in His behavior: acting and refusing to act; going and refusing to go; speaking and refusing to speak. Later, we came to see that this is the whole meaning of life in the Spirit, and that it is an altogether different life from the natural ways of men, even of Christian men (more on this later). At the time of this seeing, it was a matter of this law becoming basic, absolute, and ultimate, and it was something totally different from what had been in all our ideas and activities in Christian life and work.

Such a revelation, if it is to be a staggering and breaking thing, so that there is no strength left in us, requires a background of much vain effort. But then, it carries with it a great implication. While an end is written large in the Cross, and while that end is to be accepted as our end indeed, so that there can be no more of anything so far as we are concerned, Jesus Lives! and that means boundless possibilities.

Thus we came to see that the Red Sea and the Jordan are but two sides to the one Cross. Both symbolize the spiritual death and resurrection of the believer, but the latter carries it into another realm. Jordan sees the deliverance from judgment, death, and doom, carried on to deliverance from self; it is the practical disconnection of what is dead from what is risen. In the first it is my sins; in the second it is my self. At the crossing of the Jordan a monument of twelve stones, a type of the Israelites themselves, was left buried in the bed of the river, as if to signify that the self-life of the wilderness was to be henceforth reckoned as judged and ended as absolutely as was the bondage to Pharaoh. And then another memorial of twelve stones was taken from the bed of the river and placed on the Canaan shore, as a type of themselves, as risen not only to newness of life, but also to a perpetual and practical separation from their dead and buried selves. All this is as by union with Christ crucified and risen: for the priests stood in mid-stream with the Ark and its blood-stained Mercy-seat on their shoulders, type of Christ as in death, yet triumphing over death in virtue of His Blood: for the first set of stones were laid in the exact spot where the priests' feet had

stood.

Israel after the flesh in the wilderness, and Israel after the Spirit in Canaan, while both having known the blessing of salvation from judgment, are like two different peoples. So it was with us. The difference is unspeakably great. Someone who had been prominently in Christian work for many years described the difference - when at length he knew it - as even greater than when he first knew salvation, and that was great. We will not attempt to set down all the differences, but there is one phrase that puts so much of it all into expression - 'an open heaven'. How the life of nature blocks the way to the life of the Spirit! How doing, or attempting to do, work for God in our own natural energy closes the way to the energies of the Spirit! How our mental strivings and intellectual labours to apprehend spiritual truth lock the door to illumination by the Spirit! Yes, we know something of this, but, blessed be God, we know something of having that "natural man" put away, and Christ in greater risen and ascended fulness taking his place.

There is a double tragedy that may be associated with this subjective or experimental meaning of the Cross. On the one side, there is the tragedy of the ignorance of so many of the Lord's people, leading to or resulting in a wilderness history in life and service. A tremendous amount of energy, expenditure, effort, and strain, with spiritual results so incommensurate. The wilderness is ever a bounded place; limited by the horizons of sense; never characterized by the realization of the limitless fulnesses of the heavenly emancipation from nature.

On the other hand, there is the tragedy that this meaning or application of the Cross is positively refused and rejected by so many of the Lord's people. There is a very large body of Christians who just will not have the Cross on its subjective or experimental side. This amazes us, but it explains very much. If the "natural" man (not the unregenerate man, necessarily) still exerts an influence in the realm of Divine things, there is bound to ensue a static system of teaching, a fixed horizon of vision, a legal bondage to tradition, a fear of man, a deadening domination of the "letter" as separated from the "spirit", and many other unhappy situations of spiritual death, endless divisions, and spiritual pride. Paul's remedy for traditionalism and legalism in relation to Christians, was Christ Crucified, as see 'Romans' and 'Galatians'. The same remedy was resorted to for all the painful fruits of carnality amongst believers, as see 'Corinthians'.

Perhaps the repudiation of this application of the Cross is due to the fear of a too great subjectivity: that is, a turning of people in upon themselves. It is true that introspection is a sign of weakness and can lead to certain paralysis - indeed, it can breed very many evil things; but introspection is a misapprehension of the subjective side of the Cross. It would indeed be unsafe and disastrous for anyone to 'take up' such 'teaching', were they not already settled and established in that objective aspect, which settles once and for all the question of "all righteousness" and acceptance in Christ through faith in His perfections as for us. No; Israel in Canaan did not represent introspective self-occupation and morbid engagement with how much more they personally had to be crucified. They were free, and free to do the Lord's business. The 'Jordan' meaning of the Cross, carrying, as it does, the 'Red Sea' aspect into the realm of self-life, means freedom from self, and it is only a contradiction of the Cross to be still engrossed with self-crucifixion. But 'Jordan' is a big crisis, with an abiding application and progressive outworking.

The crisis is like the touch upon the sinew of Jacob's thigh. The strength of nature is definitely and permanently crippled, so that "Jacob" will carry that veto to his last day, when he will still be "leaning upon the top of his staff". The progressive outworking will be in the discovery of how much there is that we cannot do - are not allowed to do - of ourselves, because of that basic forbidding of the Cross. This may

take us as far as it took Paul, who in one unparalleled experience said:

"We were weighed down exceedingly, beyond our power, insomuch that we despaired even of life" ("despaired" here means 'there seemed no way out for life'): "yea, we... had the sentence of death within ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in (upon) God which raiseth the dead" (II Cor. 1:8-9).

The working of the Cross here is a subjective-objective matter, and has nothing to do with our standing or acceptance, but rather with the fulness of Christ. Because the importance of this crisis and process has to be emphasized to Christians, many have allowed it to enter into the wrong realm and almost carry them back into 'Egyptian' bondage. If the Lord brings us to the despair of Kadesh-Barnea and then shows us Romans 6, or Galatians 2:20, we must capitulate to our death position with Christ as to ourselves, just as we did as to our sins; and we must have a faith understanding with the Lord, firstly that the thing is so, whether we immediately realize it or not; and then that He is going to take us by the way that will reveal what the new position is and implies. We shall undoubtedly discover that there was far more included in the 'death' than we had any idea of; but the new position will mean enablement to acquiesce.

We have said that this 'Jordan' experience of the Cross is a crisis - and what a crisis it is! It is not only the end of one realm, it is the opening up of and entering upon a new one. So it proved to be with us, as with Israel. Through this experience we entered into a great expanse of spiritual life, light, and liberty. But then several major things began to come into view. Of course, the first of these was -

Life In The Spirit

We do not mean that there was no knowledge or experience of the Spirit before this. As with Israel, the very deliverance from Egypt and government in the wilderness was by the Pillar of Cloud and Fire; so we had known that sovereignty and grace. But Jordan marked a development in this matter. Joshua stands for ever as a type of the energies of the Holy Spirit in relation to the full thought of God. These energies stood over against the poor fruitless energies of man's own soul.

For us this had a definite subjective meaning: it meant that the Spirit's sword or knife cut clean in "to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit". There came about the recognition of the fact that the soul is one thing and the spirit is another, and that it is the latter through which the Holy Spirit realizes all the purposes of God. The soul is ourselves in intelligence, will, feeling and energy. It is not in our souls or ourselves that the Holy Spirit dwells, but in our spirits, and the renewed and indwelt spirit is the organ of Divine knowledge, purpose, and power. Life in the Spirit is only possible as this distinction is made. We have covered the ground of this distinction in a book entitled "What is Man?" and our object now is only to indicate the steps of spiritual progress. This life in the Spirit, then, means a new realm of spiritual knowledge and understanding, which is closed, very largely, even to Christians, if they have not known the meaning of death and resurrection union with Christ in its relation to the natural man, man in his natural constitution. Such may have the information which is given by the Scriptures on all matters, and even teach these things - so did we; but there is all the difference of life and death between this and being in the living good of the truth. Life in the Spirit, then, means another life, another knowledge, another energy, another capacity.

Then, of these outstanding features of the new sphere, one that very quickly came into view was the inclusive fact that life was thenceforth "in the heavenlies", and this was nothing abstract and mythical. It was to involve us in the most practical issues.

Once again, Israel's history was in the course of being repeated spiritually. In their case there was a development, even with Joshua. True, he represented - and continued to represent - the energies of the Holy Spirit, but now another feature appeared as peculiarly associated with the new place. This is described thus:

"And it came to pass, when Joshua was by Jericho, that he lifted up his eyes and looked, and, behold, there stood a Man over against him with His sword drawn in His hand: and Joshua went unto Him, and said unto Him, "Art Thou for us, or for our adversaries?" And He said, "Nay; but as Captain of the host of the Lord am I now come." And Joshua fell on his face to the earth, and did worship, and said unto Him, "What saith my Lord unto His servant?" And the Captain of the Lord's host said unto Joshua, "Put off they shoe from they foot; for the place whereon thou standest is holy." And Joshua did so" (Joshua 5:13-15).

The new feature which is brought in at this point is that of Sovereign Headship in the heavenlies in relation to spiritual warfare. The "Lord's host", the "Captain", and the "sword drawn" are very significant words. What is signified is that the Holy Spirit is not just abstract or unrelated power, neither is He present in His own name. He and His energies are related to, and are the servants of, a Sovereignty, a Throne. The Lord Jesus has been exalted to the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens. He is said to have been given that place till His enemies shall have been made the footstool of His feet. All authority has been given unto Him in heaven and on earth. There is a mighty hierarchy of evil occupying the heavenlies and making war in countless ways against that heavenly Kingdom of God's Son. Paul's well-known description is:

"Principalities... powers... world-rulers of this darkness.... spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenlies" (Ephesians 6:12).

It is precisely in relation to the destruction and ultimate casting out of this system of evil powers and intelligences that the Holy Spirit is here. He and God's Son are one in Godhead, and therefore in Divine Person, and He is here as Christ in the captaincy of the Lord's host. He is the mighty energy of that "all authority", that Throne. His it is to lead and energize the people of God against the spiritual opponents of God's purpose.

Thus, it was not long after our coming into the fuller meaning of the Cross, as to the self-life, that there broke upon us this great fact that life in the Spirit is life in the heavenlies and life in the heavenlies is meant to be a life of reigning and dominion. Again, this is a life of warfare; but in this realm and in this work it is a case, not of appealing to the Throne, but of operating or functioning as from the Throne. It is bringing that Throne to bear upon the enemy in his hold and his devices.

Whenever the Lord has brought in livingly something of His heavenly order, either initially or by recovery, He has done so with such evident tokens of it being of Himself that you never forget. For us, when this broke upon us, there was a period in which the tokens were so clear and many as to keep us in a state of wonder. The impact of the Throne was brought - through prayer - to bear upon all kinds of situations in which the enemy was very definitely implicated, and those situations were released. We are concerned now with spiritual principles, not with examples. Through the years there has been much spiritual education, and the battle has been carried into deeper realms, more and more away from the surface to the great ultimate spiritual issues of life and death, but the truth and principle remain the same, and we remain there in the positive testimony to the absolute Lordship of Christ in the universe.

But we were to learn more yet of the Divine mind, and so, in keeping with the Scriptures, we found the Lord bringing a further matter to bear upon us. Each fresh step included what went before and carried it

further. The next thing, into the spiritual value and significance of which we found ourselves being led, was:

The Heavenly Nature, Vocation,

And Destiny Of The Church

As The Body Of Christ

That which the Lord had done in us through the deeper work of the Cross had, among other things, resulted in a strange detachment in spirit from the earthly aspect of things religious. We found ourselves lifted spiritually from the forms and systems, the titles, designations, divisions, and orders of Christianity as here known amongst men; and our concern was for "all saints" without discrimination. But the Lord very definitely took us in hand to show us in a positive way the meaning of what He had done. We saw later how much this was in keeping with His Word throughout. The Altar always leads to the House; pointing on to the fact that Calvary leads to the Church. There can be no Church until there has been an Altar, but the very object of the Altar - the Cross - is the Church. And so, with steadily increasing clearness and fulness, there opened to us the reality of the Church as the Body of Christ. Its aspects or meanings are various.

Firstly, there is the fact that Christ's exaltation and reign is not just a personal matter where He is concerned. When, at length, Satan and his hosts are dispossessed of the heavenlies and cast down, it will be done through and by the Church in union with Christ as its Sovereign Head, and it will be that Church - Head and Members - that will take the place of that deposed kingdom to fulfil the governmental purpose which they have usurped and evilly exercised in God's universe. The Lord Jesus will reign and govern through His Church in that age to come.

Then, as being all-of-a-piece with this inclusive purpose, several other things became clear to us.

It is the Church which is of primary concern to the Lord in this dispensation. Everything is related to that in His mind and activity. This means, among other things, that all unrelatedness and independence, all that is merely personal, sectional, exclusive or separate must certainly fail to reach God's full end or to have His seal upon it beyond a certain point. It must inevitably stop short and be spiritually limited. Every Divine provision is unto the securing and perfecting of the Body (Eph. 4:14), and individuals can only reach fulness in a related way. If this is true then other things follow.

The Church must be on heavenly, not earthly ground. Earthly ground will provide contradictions of some sort. Anything which is, by its position, interest, relationship or title, on earthly ground, as distinguishing between the Lord's people, is a contradiction of the Church as the Body of Christ. None of this obtains in the heavenlies, and its existence here means spiritual weakness in face of the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenlies. It was borne in upon us with increasing clearness and strength that consistency with this light demanded that we must forsake all partisan or sectarian ground - indeed, all ground other than that of Christ universal in all born-again children of God - and take the position, with all artificial barriers down, that all such are "one new man in Christ". How could we honestly stand upon and for that affirmed fact and then expect people to 'join' some particular historical section of Christians, when the Church is not historical but eternal, issuing from the eternal counsels of God and continuing unto "the ages of the ages"?

The change of position involved us in immediate and misunderstandings, misconceptions, misrepresentations, ostracism, and "evil report", being "everywhere spoken against". The first thing said,

and which cost us the loss of some valued friends, was that the way that we were taking put all those who did not take the same course in the wrong. This was, of course, rather a superficial and cheap way out of a difficulty, for the same could be said of anyone or anything that departed from tradition or common acceptance in any realm whatsoever, and not least of the Lord and His apostles.

For many years we adhered to an imposed silence and refusal to try to explain, lest such a course should seem like self-vindication or self-defense.

As time has gone on and the ministry has spread so extensively, making us so widely known, the mis-apprehensions have gained in measure and strength. Hence, largely in response to the appeal of friends and the necessity of the situation, we are seeking herewith at least to clarify the position, and, if possible, correct mistaken conclusions to which some have come, either by reason of their own inability to grasp the true situation, or, maybe, because of the way in which we ourselves have put some matters.

So we return to, or pursue, this matter of the Church. Taken out of the general or immediate context certain paragraphs in our books could be made to mean quite the contrary to our intention. To begin with, we have always made the comparative the basis of any statement. That is, we have always made the matter one of comparison and contrast with what God would really have if He had His full way. Few would contend that the situation in Christianity is as God would have it. If He had His mind expressed, what so many Christian leaders call 'our unhappy divisions', and what the 'World Council of Churches' has described as 'these man-made divisions' and 'man's disorder', would not exist.

We have pronounced this situation as wrong and not according to God's mind, and have said - and do say - that these denominational divisions are a menace to spiritual fulness and a hindrance to the full purpose of God. They mean positive spiritual limitation. We believe that this situation would never have come about but for a low and weak level of spiritual life. When the tide is full the dividing 'breakwaters' disappear and lose their meaning. When it is low, they stand out stark. The difference between the natural and the spiritual is that in the one they are a necessity, in the other an exposure of tragedy. If, for some reason - an evangelistic campaign, or a spiritual-life convention - the tide rises, then we forget, for the time being, our divisions. When Christ becomes the all-dominating Object, then 'things' lose their importance. We have said that this is how it ought to be normally and not extraordinarily.

But when we have said this, and all that we could say of this kind, there remain some other points which call for explanation. They mostly come under and out of the matter of Church order.

We have intimated that behind this ministry, and largely as the occasion and venue of it, there is a company of the Lord's people who regularly meet at Honor Oak, London. We believe that the 'order' of gathering, procedure, and ministry is as near to what the Apostles sought to have as our present light permits. We do not claim to have "yet attained", neither do we account ourselves as "yet perfect", but, being open to the Lord, we are adjustable to any further leadings of the Holy Spirit. But here again is a matter which to us is of great importance, although it denotes another difference.

We have never followed a pattern discovered on earth. Either we were in culpable ignorance, blissful blindness, or providential innocence, but we knew not of the same order obtaining already. So far as we were concerned it seemed as though the Lord was beginning with us at zero. Neither had we studied the New Testament with the object of trying to formulate a New Testament church or its order. We have since come to believe that the New Testament does not give a full and final pattern for reproduction and imitation.

Thus, having set aside all the former system of organised Christianity, we committed ourselves to the principle of the organic. No 'order' was 'setup', no officers or ministries were appointed. We left it with the Lord to make manifest by 'gift' and anointing who were chosen of Him for oversight and ministry. The one-man ministry has never emerged. The 'overseers' have never been chosen by vote or selection, and certainly not by the expressed desire of any leader. No committees or official bodies have ever existed in any part of the work. Things in the main have issued from prayer. We are very conscious that mistakes have been made, but the result of these has only served to re-emphasize the above principles.

Baptism of believers by immersion has clearly become the only way by which testimony to union with Christ in death and resurrection can truly and rightly be given. The Lord's Table is seen to be the combination of all the Christian testimonies, i.e., Christ's death for us; our death in Him; the oneness of all believers in and with Him as "one loaf" (I Cor. 10:17); and the "blessed hope" of His coming again.

We also feel that the Spirit's way of bearing testimony to the oneness of the Body of Christ is by a simple act of 'laying-on of hands' by representative members ('elders') of the Church, particularly in the case of the newly baptized. This is what we believe the Scriptures mean in this connection.

Reverting to the matter of 'Church' association or connection, let two things be said with strong emphasis. One: we sincerely recognise the sovereignty of God over all that we do not believe to be His first and full will. While the 'sects' and denominations, 'missions' and institutions are a departure from the Holy Spirit's original way and intention. God has undoubtedly blessed and used these in a very real way and has sovereignly done great work through faithful men and women. We thank God that it is so, and pray that every means possible of use may have His blessing upon it. This is not said in any patronizing or superior spirit; God forbid. Any reserve is only because we feel that there has been much delay, limitation and weakness due to the departure from the first and full position of the first years of the Church's life, and because of a heart-burden for a return thereto. We cannot accept the present 'disorder' as all that the Lord would or could have, and this may involve us in the charge of being 'reactionary'.

A second thing is that, believing so strongly, as we do, that everything must proceed from the Lord by the Spirit and not be of man, we could never advise or influence people to leave their 'church', 'mission', or connection. This we have never done, but have carefully avoided doing. Some have mistakenly felt that we meant that they should do so, and have done it. Others have acted under very definite exercise before the Lord. We feel very strongly that this matter must be one which involves the spiritual life, and that it should have no less an issue at stake than the walk with God. On the same principle we have never felt that it was our business to try to duplicate or reproduce this spiritual 'order' by bringing into being churches in other places. This could easily have been done, but we have held back. Churches, we believe, must be the spontaneous result of a work of the Spirit and must be 'born' just as the individual believer is born from above. We may yet have to have clearer light and further leading on this matter, but this is as far as we have seen at present.

One other practical point must receive a mention. It is true that we have always believed that the main purpose for which this ministry was raised up was the feeding, instructing, and helping of the Lord's people, so that they might do His work more effectively. This has proved to be true, and the Lord has wonderfully enabled and supplied unto this. But let it be clearly understood that, however true this may be, we recognize without question that a great and essential part of the Church's business is that of bringing Christ to the unsaved. If unsaved ones were not continually being brought 'into the Kingdom' among us and through this ministry, we should be most distressed, and should seek earnestly that the Lord would

show us the reason why. Hence we do seek, by very definite ways and means, both at home and in other lands, to bring souls to the Saviour. Many have gone from us, during the years, into many parts of the world with this specific burden on their hearts. But, even so, evangelism is a related matter and not an end in itself. We repeat: It is the Church which is the primary and inclusive concern of the Lord in this dispensation.

As the years have passed we have found that, without premeditation, we have been increasingly occupied with God's one end - the fulness of Christ, and the ministry in all its aspects has had this as its focal centre. What an immense range and wealth there is in that clause: "to sum up all things in Christ"! Yes, it is Christ and His fulness! An adequate apprehension of Him will emancipate us from all smallness, earthboundness, and time-serving.

There are other aspects of this ministry which have given rise to misapprehension, but I trust that this much that has been written here will - at least - show that there is a meaning to it which is not that given by some, and a meaning of no small importance to all who seek the truth.

To sum up, we feel very strongly and positively that the Word of God throughout shows that God would have that at the end which corresponds with His thoughts at the beginning. There is ever and anon a call-back to "first love", "first works" and 'beginnings'. With Israel this is the clear burden of the Prophets. Before the Apostles had gone they were under obligation to re-emphasize first principles and to warn regarding departure. This, surely, is the burden of so much that they wrote. It is impossible to read John's letters and the first chapters of the Revelation, and to miss this meaning. The Lord never finally abandons His first position and revealed full mind. He may, in sovereignty, use all that He can as fully as He can, but if what obtains is other or less than that which He has shown to be His mind, there will be severe limitations and weaknesses.

Such limitations should give deep exercise of heart and lead to serious enquiry, and we believe that there are in fact many indications of such exercise and concern at this time. If the Bible is to be our guide, and if we are to take Church history seriously, then both of these make one thing clear. It is that, however long the Lord may bear with or sovereignly use the less, He at length forces the issue of the absolute by suffering and shaking and overthrowing, and by compelling to the essential, the spiritual, the intrinsic, and the full. This may be the great lesson that China should teach, and it will - at the end - be much more far-reaching. The fulness of Christ; the full and accurate thought of God; the true way of the Spirit - these are not ultimately optional. The vindication may await the time of the big testing and shaking, but it will as surely come, as did that of Jeremiah, Paul, and others; some even in our own generation.

What we have written above has been but our testimony. We do not give it as a Statement of doctrine, 'Principles and Practice', to which we expect anyone to conform, or as a basis of fellowship. The Spirit of God must bear witness to the truth in any unprejudiced and open heart, and we are quite content to have it so.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/t-austin-sparks/explanation-of-the-nature-and-history-of-this-ministry/>

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