

# God's End and God's Way

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*God's purpose is to sum up all things in Christ, and to reveal His fullness in and through the Church.*

**Scripture:** Ephesians 1:9

**Topics:** "God's Purpose", "The Church as the Body of Christ"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes God's eternal will and purpose, which centers on Christ as the head of the Church, His body, through which God's fullness is expressed. He explains that spiritual fullness is achieved by recognizing God's singular purpose and the necessity of the Church in fulfilling that purpose. Sparks highlights that the Church is not merely a collection of individuals but a living organism that must function in unity to realize God's intentions. He warns against the dangers of individualism and stresses the importance of mutual interdependence within the Body of Christ for spiritual growth. Ultimately, he calls for a deeper understanding of the Cross and its role in achieving spiritual fullness and overcoming the limitations of the natural life.

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## Transcript

"Having made known unto us the mystery of His will... to sum up all things in Christ... according to the purpose of Him Who worketh all things after the counsel of His will... He put all things in subjection under His (Christ's) feet, and gave Him to be Head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all" (Eph. 1:9-11, 22-23).

There are three main parts to that statement.

1. The eternal will and purpose of God.
2. Christ as the centre of that purpose.
3. The Church, which is His Body, the vessel of the full expression of the purpose - that is, of Christ.

We are shown God in eternal counsels purposing. In outlining and devising His intentions to create and constitute "all things," "in the heavens and upon the earth" (Eph. 1:10), He was moved and governed by a specific and definite purpose. This "Purpose" is mentioned a number of times in the New Testament, and various things are shown to be related to it. It is most important that we recognize that, however many phases there may be in Divine activity, the purpose of God is one. Nothing is an end in itself. The first law of spiritual fullness (and be it observed that fullness is what is in view) is to apprehend the fact and nature

of God's all-governing purpose. It is an impressive and painful fact that there is very, very little of what is associated here with the Lord that is really marked by spiritual fullness. Smallness, weakness, limitation, poverty, defeat, ignorance, immaturity, and disappointment characterize so many of the Lord's people, and so much of the Lord's work. This is one of the things that is causing so much distress, inquiry, and effort in some quarters.

May not the explanation be that nothing that is only a part of a whole can reach and realize the whole purpose? To be in the way of fullness it is essential that, in the first place, we recognize and realize that God is not just a Busybody in a large number of good and merciful activities; but that He is wholly occupied with one all-inclusive, and all-related purpose! "Who worketh ALL THINGS after the counsel of His own will." The measure of ultimate attainment and accomplishment will be according to our initial apprehension of a single purpose. When that is established, we shall soon move on to see what the purpose is, and how - and by what means - it will be realized. If a master-man has a single purpose to which he has abandoned himself, he will require that all who work for him are not just doing various things, however good they may be, even as parts of his whole work, but that they are seeing beyond their own job and part to the whole end and object, and are working positively to that. He will be favourable to any who come to work for him and to any means employed, only in so far as the full purpose is in their heart. The measure of his resource and fullness will be given on this basis alone. So it is with God. But let it be understood that it is spiritual fullness that is in view, not personal gratification.

Then the purpose is to sum up all things in Christ. It is a Person filled full, enlarged, and all-comprehending. The greatness, the magnificence, the universal fullness of Christ is God's goal. Again, it is not sufficient that we see the purpose, basic as that is, but that we see - in an ever-growing way - the fullness of Christ. There must be an initial seeing of this greatness, this majesty, this glory, this universality. It was such a seeing that accounted for the power, effectiveness, and glory of the Church's first days. That was the meaning of "Pentecost". It was such a seeing that made the Apostles the men that they were. Paul owed everything to God's revealing of His Son in him. But that seeing must go on. It must become ever fuller. We must not just date our seeing of Christ to some past experience. It is the Lord's will that we shall so live in and walk by the Spirit that we are able to say that what we see of Christ today is infinitely greater and more wonderful than ever it has been. That is only in line with God's purpose, and it is so for all who have truly come into a spiritual apprehension thereof.

Then in the third place we move to see God's method and means of fulfilling His eternal purpose. This is by way of "the church, which is His (Christ's) body". The Church is definitely stated to be "the fullness of Him that filleth all in all". That universal fullness of Christ is determined to be revealed and expressed in and through a vessel called the Church. What is this Church?

Firstly, it is said to be an elect company of people. Leaving all theories of election, let us be content, for the moment, to see that God has eternally determined to have such a company, and that election is related to purpose, not primarily - if at all - to salvation. God knows, He cannot help knowing, the ultimate reactions of people to His presentations, and according to His foreknowledge He has foreordained to His purpose. But God has never said to any unsaved person that he or she is so foreordained. He only calls. The Church is the company of the called who obeyed.

Secondly, the Church is something greater than the churches. Whatever we may mean by the latter, the Church may be in them all, or it may not be in many of them at all. The Church is essentially a spiritual thing; not sectarian, denominational, "ecclesiastical," traditional, etc. It is the spiritual relatedness as of a

living organism; a body possessing one life; it is a single entity, an "all one in Christ". The measure of light does not make for a more or less membership of that Body, although that may affect functioning. The apprehension of "Church Truth" does not constitute Church membership, although it will greatly affect the matter of fullness. Vital relatedness to Christ is the basis of Body actuality.

But when we have said that, we must point out how important the recognition of the Church is. Next to the revelation of Christ personally in His greatness, the revelation of the Church is bound up with our practical progress toward fullness. Paul has a far greater fullness in his writings than any other Apostle, and this is mainly due to the specific revelation of the Church which was given to him. What arises from this revelation is that Christ and the Church are one, as Head and members of one Body.

There are one or two things which arise for our apprehension in this matter. Firstly there is the fact - so clearly and fully given in the Scriptures - that God has just as definitely chosen and appointed the Church for the realization of His eternal purpose as He has chosen and appointed His Son. He has just as positively bound Himself and His fullness to the one as to the other. While one is subject to the other, and the medium and vessel of the other - as the wife to the husband (Eph. 5:22-24), they are one in the matter of purpose. This carries with it the jealousy of God for His Church, and means that for fullness there can be no allowing of an ignoring, belittling, or injuring.

Further; God will keep strictly - in the matter of spiritual fullness - to working Bodywise. That is, it is not possible for any units as such to know fullness. Fullness is a related matter. "The Church is the fullness of Him." No individual can be that. Therefore spiritual oneness, inter-relatedness, fellowship, mutuality, and interdependence are basic and indispensable to spiritual attainment of full-growth. "Till we all attain unto... a full grown man, unto... the fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13).

In the Old Testament, when things were constituted according to the heavenly pattern, God spoke out of the Tent of Meeting. So it is in the New Testament. For the answer to his inquiry on the Damascus Road, Paul had to go into the city and get it as out from the Church. For the entering upon his great life-work he had to abide in the Church at Antioch and get his commission confirmed there (Acts 13). All this does not mean that God has never sovereignly and in grace moved without the recognition of this law by those concerned for His interests, but we are speaking of spiritual fullness, and our ministry is concerned with that. It is not a committee, "General," "Executive," or "Advisory," but the "Body" in representation and spiritual functioning that is God's ordained way.

It would take much more space than we have at our disposal to set forth all the values and implications of an apprehension of God's place and purpose for His Church in all things. This is one of the matters which has had a considerable place in our spoken and written ministry through these past years.

This leads on to the churches; that is, the local companies of God's people. Times and conditions have changed greatly since New Testament days; that is, so far as the Western world is concerned. It was simple and straightforward to gather together believers in Christ in those times; there were only believers and non-believers. Today numerous other questions arise; such as "Connection," "Order," "Practice," "Belief," etc. But there are one or two things which must still govern this matter: they are

1. - The local church or assembly is intended to be locally all that the Church as a whole is universally. It must not be smaller in its vision, its vocation, its relatedness. Though locally placed, it is universal in nature, outreach, concern, and function. If it lives unto itself it will die. Fullness is dependent upon its spiritual length and breadth, and height and depth.

2. - The local church is the spiritual training-ground for all usefulness to the Lord. There all the essential lessons are learned, not by teaching alone, but by spiritual discipline. The very vital lesson of subjection to the Lord - which means so much in the matter of spiritual growth - is learned in a very practical way in a true assembly and fellowship life. All independent, unrelated, and merely personal life is impossible when the "Body" is truly recognized.

The spiritual support, upholding, encompassing, and covering of the Lord's people in something more than a general way is of tremendous value and consequence. Far from the local church being but a "congregation" or a preaching place, it is intended to be a local expression of the family of God, and to fulfil all the functions and provide all the values of a true family life and relationship.

3. - The matter of pre-eminent importance in the local church, as in the universal, is the absolute sovereign headship of Christ. Anything which usurps this, or in any way conflicts with it, will most certainly result in spiritual limitation and proportionate retarding of growth. Is this not why, in the New Testament churches, no one man exercised headship, but elders - not an elder - were appointed. The "Body" principle is upheld in the corporate, and individual sovereignty is prevented. At Antioch the "Holy Spirit said" to a company of representative men, who were together in spiritual responsibility. Eldership is representation - spiritual measure, not ecclesiastical. The New Testament plurality of eldership means that the church is brought - as in and by its representatives - under the complete sovereignty of Christ through the Holy Spirit.

4. - We must then see that the Apostles never set out with the plan to form churches. That was the spontaneous and necessitated result of the Holy Spirit's work in every place. Christ was preached and accepted, and relatedness spontaneously followed (see Acts 2:42). That which decides churches is Christ. This is the solution of and the answer to many of the problems and questions which arise, especially in this Western world in these peculiarly complicated times. What is to be our guiding and deciding principle in gathering together? It is to be Christ! We meet on that ground alone. Where God's end is most fully in view, and what provides most fully for its attainment - the fullness of Christ - decides where we ought to be, and no one ought to quarrel with that. It is because of a devotion to and jealousy for some "thing"; a "Mission," "Denomination," "Tradition," "Fellowship," "Movement," etc., that rivalries, and bad feelings spring up. All the talk about "sheep stealing" and "dividing the Lord's people," or a great deal of it, arises out of a concern for - not spiritual growth - but something here on the earth. How very much of this talk would be impossible if everyone concerned took the attitude that it does not matter what survives or ceases to exist so long as Christ is being increased in a spiritual way. This involves the necessity that all the Lord's people, and particularly those in "official" positions, and positions of influence, should be utterly and only devoted to the increase of Christ. Christ is not divided, therefore Christ is the ground of unity, not the things as mentioned above.

Whose sheep are they? Are they ours? Can Christ's sheep be stolen by those who are devoted to Him? If they are sheep of this or that, then things are in another realm. No, all this sort of thing is the cause of spiritual weakness and smallness, and a new mind as to Christ Himself is needed for fullness.

Finally, in this connection, and for the moment; everything appointed by the Lord is intended to be for the direct and positive "building up of the body". That marks its object and direction, and its unifying law. Evangelism, Teaching, Gifts, personal and spiritual, etc., are all said definitely to be to this one end. The evangelist and evangelism are not an end in themselves, nor something apart. The New Testament overwhelms such an idea or procedure most completely. All these functions are "Body" functions, and for a well-balanced Body they must be kept together; neither emphasized to the detriment of the other;

neither left out. A teaching ministry must go hand-in-hand with an evangelistic ministry; and the other way round. Everyone who functions as a member of Christ's Body - and all members should function - should have in view - not souls being saved, not saints being instructed, but - through these, and all other means, the increase of Christ. Let us remember that the Church is not large or small; our work is not more or less successful according to the number of people represented, but according to the positive measure of Christ.

I cannot close this review without a brief reference to one or two other matters which are vital to this ministry.

There is the matter of the Cross. It will not be saying anything fresh or unusual when we say that the Cross of Christ is deeply bound up with the question of Divine fullness. But how this is so demands a continuous re-emphasis and growing unfolding. The Scriptures make it quite clear that right to the very end the Adversary will seek with all his might and by every means to revive the question of acceptance and standing with God. He is seen very late in the day (Rev. 12) as the "accuser of the brethren," and the destruction of assurance is one of his most determined endeavours. Everything that carries with it the idea of our doing anything and making ourselves anything to obtain the mercy of God and attain unto acceptance with Him, bears the hallmark of the Devil himself. Christ's death for us and our death with Him is the only, but the sure ground of full acceptance! Luther said it very utterly when he put it thus-

"O Christ, I am Thy sin, Thy curse, Thy wrath of God, Thy hell; and contrariwise, Thou art my righteousness, my blessing, my life, my grace of God, my heaven."

No wonder the Devil hated Martin Luther and assailed him so bitterly.

But there is not only the basic, initial, perfect value of the Cross for our full and unquestioned acceptance; there is a meaning of the Cross in relation to spiritual fullness and fruitfulness. It is what Paul calls "Being made conformable to His death" (Phil. 3:10).

This, let us emphasize, must be kept apart from our justification and access to God. How very much of the tragedy, scandal, defeat, weakness, deadness, limitation and unloveliness of many Christian people and Christian institutions, communities and churches is due to uncrucified "flesh" or natural life! How greatly Christ is hidden from view by men and things and methods which bring themselves into prominence! The need, if He is to come to the place of the Divine intention, and we with Him, is for a continuous and ever-deepening working of the Cross in us. We really must be in a position to say "I have been crucified with Christ". Yes, but also to complete the statement "It is no longer I, but Christ." Is it true - "No longer I?" "No... I"? That is what Paul meant, but who can know the depth of that "I". Only Christ knows how deep and thorough His Cross is, and we must hand ourselves over to Him for the Holy Spirit to work all His meaning of the Cross in us, if the way is to be clear for His fullness.

So the twofold meaning and message of the Cross is a very strong part of this ministry. There are many who do not like the latter and will not have it. We can only say that if they represent something far more than the average in spiritual wealth and their apprehension of Christ, and if that with which they are connected is free from the common results of the strength of the natural life; then there is something in their antagonism to the subjective meaning of the Cross to which we must give heed. But we have been there ourselves, and know the difference.

We must close, and we do so with a reference to one other matter. Many may agree with much that we have written, but they will react to it by saying that it is "idealistic"; it is too high; as things are now it is not possible; we cannot hope for such a recovery. Well, there is one answer to that attitude. The Bible has always recognized and provided for a position like that. It was but a small number of the captive nation of Israel who returned voluntarily to rebuild the city, the wall, the house at Jerusalem, and the word which governed and characterized them was, "Whoso is of a willing heart, his God be with him".

In the Book of the Revelation it is clear that the majority had left the full thought of the Lord. The appeal there is to those within who have "an ear to hear". We find them called "Overcomers," and this clearly relates to the decadent conditions; a reaction to the Lord's full and original thought. It is hardly to be expected that all Christians will respond to the appeal and standard, but it is clear that they can, the Lord wills it, and what He wills is not out of the question. It may be a costly way; and the cost will be mainly acute because of the attitude of other Christians.

Hence, we realize that this ministry will sift the Lord's people, and only those who really mean business with God and to "go on to full-growth" will have a place for it. Our message is therefore one which will affect the "Overcomers," although we do not regard them as an elect of the elect, a select spiritual aristocracy. They will have a place of special honour because in them the Lord will have that upon which His heart has been set from the beginning. The difference will be that which is seen ultimately between Joseph and his brethren.

Such ministry as that of which we have spoken will be the outcome of His very deep and drastic dealings with us. It is not something studied and worked out mentally. We shall never be off the wheel as a vessel finished, but somehow the Lord will combine the moulding and the using. Surely this is as it should be. "The Lord's messenger in the Lord's message" contains the vital principle that the instrument should never be in advance of its spiritual history. Even prophets who spoke of things to come, and of many things the meaning of which was not fully clear to them, were made to have their ministry inwrought by practical experience. But the drastic handling is ever unto increase and progress. Such a ministry cannot be "taken up," or adopted. We cannot go into it as we go into any other kind of work, by technical or intellectual training or instruction. Indeed, it is something from which to shrink naturally, as did Moses, Jeremiah, and others. It is helpful and interesting or enlightening to see that, when the Lord spoke through Jeremiah to Israel about the potter's house, and the potter, and then Himself took the place of the potter, the moulding, shaping, correcting, adjusting, purging, unto usefulness was by means of the assaults and inflictions of enemy activity. There was a connection between the Potter's hands and a foreign ruler's opposition and besieging. So for fuller usefulness the Lord uses the enemy and his work, and we are not for long free from this pressure.

These, then, are the main things to which we are called and committed. "Here we stand, we can do no other, God help us."

The Lord give you all a heart to "follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth," and to reach unto His fullness.

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