

In the Letter to the Ephesians

by T. Austin-Sparks

T. Austin-Sparks explores the profound truths of the Letter to the Ephesians, emphasizing the Church's identity in Christ and its heavenly calling amidst historical challenges.

Scripture: Isaiah 55:8-9, Luke 17:20, John 12:24, 2 Corinthians 4:18, Ephesians 1:3, Ephesians 2:6, Ephesians 3:21, Ephesians 4:8, 2 Timothy 1:15, Revelation 2:1-7

Topics: "Spiritual Warfare", "The Church"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks explores the profound themes of the Letter to the Ephesians, emphasizing the historical context of the Apostle Paul's ministry and the subsequent spiritual decline in Ephesus. He reflects on the Church's divine unity, its eternal purpose, and the challenges it faces in maintaining its spiritual vitality amidst institutionalization. Sparks raises critical questions about the authenticity of the Church's expression today, urging believers to seek Christ as the true foundation of their faith and community. He asserts that the Letter is not merely idealistic but offers a realistic and comprehensive view of the Church's role in God's eternal plan, centered on the Cross and the presence of Christ.

Transcript

It is not our intention to enter upon a general exposition of this Letter. Our present concern is with some of the questions which it raises in the light of history, and that history at, and from, the time when the Letter was written.

Firstly, there was the situation at the end of the Apostle Paul's life. Here is a man writing under the guidance of the Holy Spirit about the greatness of the Church; its eternal election and vocation; its Divine unity, interrelatedness, manifold function, and spiritual warfare. All this and much more, with a background of his relationship with churches in Asia, and particularly with Ephesus. We remember his extended time of ministry in Ephesus and the wonderful response thereto (Acts 19:19). Later he said to the elders there that he had not 'shunned to declare (unto them) the whole counsel of God' (Acts 20:20), and when meeting those elders on his journey to Jerusalem, we read of the very touching farewell to them and how they wept and sorrowed at his departure. And now, AT MOST seven years later, he writes to Timothy that "all they in Asia be turned from me" (2 Timothy 1:15). If Paul died (by execution) in the year A.D. 67 and John wrote the Revelation in the year A.D. 95 (as is most strongly believed) then in less than thirty years a very big spiritual change had taken place in Ephesus (Revelation 2:1-7): "Thou hast left thy first love... From whence thou art fallen..." etc. Paul's triumphant ministry; Paul's departure sorrowed over; and now

Paul repudiated, discredited or forsaken. And yet, this Letter is Divinely preserved and blessed to countless believers through all the centuries!

But what of subsequent history? Through all these centuries to what degree has there been in this world a representation and expression of the Church as we have it in "Ephesians"? Where in all the world can we find such an expression in our day? It would seem that the last and least company of Christians is involved in the struggle for unity, for impact, for spiritual ascendancy! Anything precious to the Lord is so bitterly assailed that its fellowship and fullness are all too soon disrupted. It is quite evident that when Paul wrote his last Letters - to Timothy - there was an incipient movement toward what has now become almost general - the institutional Church with form but without organic life. With all the books that have been written on "Ephesians", and all the extolling of it as "the greatest document ever penned"; with all the acclaiming of it as THE greatest revelation of the Church, where can we find anything that approximates to it in reality?

The questions confronting us with this Letter in hand are:

Is it just idealistic? Do we have to say in regard to it what Dr. Campbell Morgan said about Ezekiel's Temple: "It is just what God would have had if He could have had His way"? or again: Is this Church of "Ephesians" for the future in the "ages of the ages", a phrase used so much by Paul? In which case is it futile to labour and hope for it now? Are we to accept the "total ruin" theory? Comprehensively, with all the wonders and glories of the beginnings of Christianity, was there EVER anything wholly corresponding to this Letter? Are you shocked with these questions? Do you think that, after all, it is just a comparative approximation, more or less? That position can hardly satisfy those who have stood for the revelation in the Ephesian Letter.

Therefore, is there some other answer? Is the answer in the direction of a misunderstanding and misapprehension of the Letter? It is here that we touch what will not only answer our distressing questions, but put us into the realm of the immense spiritual values and dynamics of the revelation contained in this document. But let there be no misapprehension here. It will be the greatest challenge and test to Christendom and Christianity, while at the same time involving in a very real conflict with all the cosmic forces which have so bitterly fought against the true understanding of this Divine revelation!

Far from being only idealistic or mystical, we shall see as we proceed that it is an intensely realistic document. There are one or two things that must be recognized before we can proceed to consider its answer to the confrontations mentioned.

THE COMPREHENSIVENESS OF EPHESIANS

This is not a new and different presentation of truth, but an inclusive embodiment of all New Testament teaching. The Gospels are here. (See our early chapters.) "Romans" is here, for the total setting aside of the first Adam is implicit here. "Corinthians" is here, for the "spiritual" man is demanded, and the "natural" man would spoil everything here. "Galatians" is here, for there can be no compromise, no mid-course, no perversion or two contraries here; and so on.

Having pointed that out, let us proceed to consider four factors which support the present-age validity of "Ephesians".

THE STANDPOINT OF EPHESIANS

This can prove to be the most testing, searching, and revolutionary factor in Church history. The point of view certainly does determine everything. Five times in the Letter the word "Heavenly" is used (1:3,20; 2:6; 3:10; 6:12), relating respectively to the believer's blessings; Christ's exaltation; the believer's position; the Church's vocation; and the Church's warfare. Everything is viewed from above, but that 'aboveness' is not confined to location. It means another way of estimating, defining, judging. It is a different mindedness from the earthly. On this matter the statement of God is: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9). It becomes necessary, therefore, for us to be brought to the place where we see what God is looking for and at, as so vastly different from our own mentality. This is the key to everything, and, as we have said, most revolutionary. Our mentality as to the Church is almost, if not entirely, earthly.

What ARE we looking for and at in this respect? Let us sift down from what may be the largest to the smallest. Is it a national Church, Roman, Anglican, Greek, Dutch (Reformed), etc.? Is it denominational, Methodist, Baptist, Episcopal, Lutheran, Presbyterian, Independent, etc.? Is it 'Free' or 'State', Undenominational, Interdenominational? Is it 'Open' or 'Exclusive'? Is it something with certain particular characteristics and techniques of practice, form, and behaviour? Is it a 'New Testament Church', or churches, with certain things taken from the New Testament to constitute it? Is it a cathedral or a building, great or small? Is it a place at all, whether simple, plain, or ornate? Is God looking down from the "Heavenlies" and focusing His attention upon, or looking for, ANY of these? Is this what He wants? Do these things interest Him at all? Is He impressed with the regalias and adornments; with the pomp and processions of display? Do our ecclesiastical and ministerial attire and dress, robes, vestments, gowns, hoods, impress the Almighty? Does He look down upon them with admiration and wonder? Does He view them at all, or ignore them? If He does behold them, may it not be with pity, or even amusement? Poor little people playing at churches and chapels, like Jesus' children in the market-place playing at weddings and funerals! Is ANY or ALL of this what takes the eye of "He that sitteth in the heaven"? (Psalm 2:4).

All or any of this may be our way of viewing the Church, and it is wholly an earthly view! If we saw from Heaven's standpoint, how foolish so much of it would become to us. Just as the biggest things of earth, whether people or mountains, are all the same in elevation when we look down from a high aerial position, so the things so important to man down here lose their importance when we see God's standards of values.

HISTORY'S VERDICT

The verdict of history is clearly that God DOES NOT either tie Himself up with, nor preserve things on this earth in THEMSELVES. Tennyson, the poet, said:

"Our little systems have their day;

They have their day and cease to be."

Paul said: "The things which are seen are temporal [transient]" (2 Corinthians 4:18).

History's verdict upon things which have ceased to fulfil THE ESSENTIAL PURPOSE OF THEIR EXISTENCE, however greatly they may have served a Divine purpose at some time, is that God has left them and they have either been destroyed or left desolate. So it was with the Tent at Shiloh, the Temple in Jerusalem, the 'Churches' in Asia, and numerous other places and things. Nothing is sacred to God if it

does not fulfil its Divinely intended purpose. The world, and history, are strewn with such relics; desolation, abandonment, death, and coldness declare God's 'No interest'. Men strive to keep something going; try to live on a past; but the responsibility is left with them, and the limitation of God's sponsorship will slowly wear them out unless the Divine intention is recovered. The Wailing Wall in Jerusalem is a symbol of history's verdict, and centuries of tears testify to God-forsakenness.

That is all very sad and tragic, and we yearn to get away from it, learning its lesson, and to come to the answer to it all. We ask again, what has been

HEAVEN'S FOCUS THROUGH THE AGES?

We have seen that the Letter to the Ephesians (so-called - it was a circular letter) bounds all the ages from eternity to eternity. Its range is from "before the foundation of the world" (1:3) unto "the ages of the ages" (3:21). But what is the focus of this Letter in THAT ETERNAL CONTEXT? There is no missing it. One fragment focuses all.

"Unto him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus unto all generations for ever and ever" (margin: "unto the ages of the ages").

You must read this whole Letter (which you can do in a few minutes) with the object of seeing the place and mention of Christ in it. (And the companion Letter, Colossians, with it.)

This Letter goes back before Genesis, and takes up Genesis. In both a Person is brought into view and that Person is never again lost sight of. By personal figures; by types, symbols, prophecies, and a thousand means; in feasts and ordinances, that One Person is ever present, latent or patent! By name He is the Messiah, the Anointed One, the Christos. Every anointing points to Him. He is the focus of the ages and the eternities. What is Heaven EXCLUSIVELY looking for and looking at? Emphatically, only that which is essentially that Person. Not now symbols, figures, types, representations, but reality, actuality! No, not the "Church" as something objective! No, not the Kingdom of heaven as place and object of perception! "The kingdom of heaven cometh not with observation" (Luke 17:20). It is a fallacy to think and speak of the Church without meaning Christ Himself. They are not subject and object! They are one. The Church is His Body, His wife; they are "one flesh" (5:31). This is "Ephesians". It is equally fallacious to think and speak of the Kingdom of heaven and not mean Himself. They are the same. In the Gospels the two are brought together. The Messiah is present both as King and Kingdom. The very nature of the Kingdom corresponds to that of "the Son of Man". It, as He, is from heaven.

All this, and what it implies, was AN ABSOLUTE REVOLUTION IN MESSIANIC MENTALITY.

How does it all answer the tremendous questions with which we began, in relation to the Letter to the Ephesians? In this way. What God and Heaven are looking for and at is not SOMETHING called the Church, nor for local churches, AS SUCH. God and Heaven are looking for Christ, in His nature, heavenly nature; in SPIRIT and TRUTH; in eternal life; in conduct and behaviour; in virtues and character; in influence and impact; and in victory over sin, Satan and the world. IT IS POSITIVELY NOT LOCALITY IN TERMS OF GEOGRAPHY, but "Whosoever two or three are gathered together in [into] my name, THERE am I." That may be on a ship or in an aeroplane, neither of which can be fixed in locality. Christ MAY be in Ephesus, or Laodicea, or any other place, but it is the Christ which defines the Church, not the place! Christ may be in the congregation, the institution, the denomination, while none of them - AS A WHOLE - may be in Christ. We seek Him. We gather unto Him. HE is the Ground; we meet on Him.

There is a vast amount in "Christendom" and "Christianity" to which we have to deliberately close our eyes, and "not know after the flesh", while we seek for what there is of Christ IN PEOPLE. "Our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son." If we cannot find Him, then there is no heavenly fellowship.

How well I am aware that many questions will be provoked by what I have said, and perhaps the most difficult is the one concerning gathering together, and what has become the problem of local churches. The procedure of men has been to start from the outside or from some more or less advanced point of Christian development. To FORM a church or churches. The names may vary; churches, assemblies; congregations; meetings, etc. Some form, either of doctrine, creed, or practice and procedure has been conceived, often with a greater or lesser degree of Scriptural authority; sometimes with a reading INTO Scripture of an interpretation or meaning which is not really there in truth. Sometimes there is a part of the whole truth, so that it is a certain aspect of the truth for which the particular group stands. The reasons and occasions of the numerous 'bodies' or sects or companies are as manifold as there are such bodies. Too often it is something 'FORMED' by men, and something which they SET OUT to do. To say this is to touch the root of most of the trouble in Christianity. But let us approach it positively.

We are being taught by the Letter to the Ephesians, and what is it saying? We have seen that the Church is Christ, all its parts being parts of His Body. Is that true? Do you believe that? Not that He has no personal existence apart from His Body, but He is the very personality within the Body and only death can separate the two. If this identification with Christ is spiritually true, as the New Testament teaches, we have to ask: How did Christ come into being? Did He appear as a full-grown man? Was He made with hands? Was He put together as a composite entity? Did someone, or a group of people, get some ideas as to what He should be and then get to work to give them a form? Perhaps you are smiling, or are scandalized that such things should be asked. But is that not that which largely expresses the mentality concerning the Church and churches? But how DID Christ come into this world? Was it not simply by BIRTH? There was a seed (that is a Scriptural word about Him from Genesis onward) and that "seed" held the life in which was all the nature, the complexion, the capacity, the form, the purpose, and the destiny of that Entity. That seed was born, and for reproduction was 'planted', fell into the ground and died (John 12:24). The Church is the issue of that seed, holding the same life and potential. The true Church - wherever found - MUST follow the history of Christ spiritually. It must be born, "not made with hands". "God dwelleth not in temples made with hands" - a statement for which Stephen forfeited his life. It must be begotten of God, born of the Holy Spirit, circumcized (in heart), baptized into His death; raised together with Him, anointed for its ministry; led into the battle of the ages, and joined with Him on heavenly ground. It is Christ, always, everywhere! This is "Ephesians". But one word more remains to be said. It concerns

THE BASIS OF ALL

This Letter to the Ephesians (so-called) is a kind of culmination, a summary. The SPIRITUAL sequence is right, if the chronology is not in order. The Cross stands central, universal and supreme. The Church here as the Christ corporately expressed stands on the full ground of the Cross. It is not just the local Cross, the historic Cross, it is the cosmic Cross. In that super-mundane realm Christ - by His Cross - stripped off the principalities and powers (Colossians 2:15) and "led his captivity captive" (Ephesians 4:8), and by His victory placed His Church above all. But this is inclusive of Romans, Corinthians and Galatians. See what the Cross means in those situations, and then gather that together and you have "Ephesians".

Our "Church ground" must be Christ, only Christ, and this must decide everything and be the answer to all our "Church" problems. But let us hasten to add, that the Letter before us does show how very great are

the values of a corporate expression of Christ ANYWHERE. These values are to the individual believer and to the world around. Such matters are bound up with this body presence of Christ as protection and covering; building up and maturing; rooting and grounding; spiritual power and ascendancy; mutual functioning and ministry; a testimony and impact in the realms of satanic and angelic intelligences. All this is in the Letter as related to a true expression of Christ. If we ask: 'Can such an expression be?' our answer is: 'Yes, if not in perfection and completeness, it can be in vital measure.' The tenses of "Ephesians" may help us. The past: "You DID he quicken when you WERE dead." That was the beginning. There is much that is retrospective as to their hitherto spiritual history. The present - the CONTINUOUS present - the bulk of the Letter is concerned with growth, building up, "UNTO the full-grown man". Future, "that he might present to himself a glorious church". "Glory in the church... unto the ages of the ages."

Note: The eternal and present criterion or test of "Church", whether universal or local, is the presence of Christ. Is He found there? If we are in the Spirit, can we meet Him, and truly say: 'The Lord was there today!?' The presence of Christ determines whether that is the true Church. The MEASURE of Christ will determine, not BASIC relationship, but the measure of fellowship, spontaneous spiritual mutuality.

The standpoint - a heavenly position, not earthly.

The focus - "Christ - all, and in all."

The basis - the Cross, initial and continuous.

The dynamic - the "power that worketh in us".

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/t-austin-sparks/in-the-letter-to-the-ephesians/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net