

Jerusalem in Relation to Universality

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Church's universality and exclusiveness are complementary, with Christ, the Cross, and the Holy Spirit making it both inclusive and exclusive.

Topics: "The Church", "Spiritual Universality"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that Jerusalem symbolizes the Church, representing both its exclusivity and universality. He explains that while Jerusalem is a defined city with boundaries, it also has universal significance, connecting all nations spiritually. The universality of the Church is rooted in the person of Jesus Christ, the Cross, the divine life given to believers, and the governance of the Holy Spirit. Sparks warns against counterfeit forms of universality and the dangers of earthly influences that can lead to division within the Church. Ultimately, he calls for a clear understanding of the Church's spiritual nature, which transcends geographical and cultural limitations.

Transcript

READING: Isa. 52:1, 7-8, 14-15; Acts 2:5, 7-11; 10:11-16, 34-35.

Let us remind ourselves that Jerusalem, in the Word of God, especially stands for the Church. It is an inclusive and comprehensive representation of the Church; and what we are seeking to see is the spiritual constitution of the Church, what the Church really is according to the Word of God, and what the Church's vocation is.

It does not require very much profound or energetic thinking to recognise that universality runs in very close relationship to spirituality and heavenliness. The heavens are always the symbol of universality. That is very clear. When you get into the heavens you get away from the narrow limitations of life, all the geographical confinement, and you are out in what is absolutely universal. The same is true in the matter of spirituality. When you get into the realm of things spiritual, there again you have left behind all that is small, and limited, and restricted; you have broken all ties.

So that heavenliness and spirituality lead us very definitely and distinctly into the universal, and one thing which is of the greatest importance for the Lord's people to be sure about is the universality of the Church. It is necessary to define that. It is necessary to have a very clear apprehension of it. Such as are really concerned with that great Divine object, that which has been in the mind of God before the world was, that which is the preeminent object of God in this dispensation, need to have a clear and definite grasp of its

nature; and when we speak of its universality we want to be careful, to be quite sure, as to what we mean by that.

The Exclusiveness and Universality of the Church as typified in Jerusalem.

When you come to the Word of God and study Jerusalem you find two things which seem, on the surface, to be mutually exclusive; that is, these two things are difficult of reconciliation; they appear to be contradictory.

On the one hand, Jerusalem is a clearly defined and distinctly bounded city. Jerusalem has a wall, and that wall goes right round: and Jerusalem has gates; and the purpose of walls and gates is to exclude and admit, to govern, therefore, in the matter of who shall be in the city and who shall not. So that Jerusalem is very strictly defined, and, in a sense, appears to be both inclusive and exclusive; that is, it says to a certain company, You are of the city! and it says to another company, You are not of the city, and have no place in it!

On the other hand, there is the fact that Jerusalem is represented as being universal. You touch many universal elements when you read the history of Jerusalem. You find that all nations are touched by Jerusalem, and touch Jerusalem, that its relationships are comprehensive, extensive. The only word which adequately expresses it is "universal." It is set down in the midst of a country which can never be said for a moment to be of one fixed and exclusive aspect. Palestine is marked by two extremes, with every shade between them. At a certain time of the year you can sit at a particular point in Palestine and boil in a temperature of a hundred, and from where you sit thus perspiring with intense heat you view the snows of Hermon. You can stand upon a point and at one time see palm trees and pine trees, speaking of two extremes. At the southern part of the Jordan valley you have a sub-tropical climate; in the northern part of the Jordan valley you have a sub-Alpine climate; and there is every phase, and every degree, between these two extremes in the land. In some parts you find the shepherds wearing sheepskin cloaks, which speaks of cold; in other parts you find them doing everything to keep out the heat. These are geographical and climatic features which are illustrative and typical of the universality of the land. Jerusalem is set down in the midst of that land. Hardly a nation on this earth has failed at some time or other to have some kind of relationship with Jerusalem, and with Palestine, and we know that there is yet to be history in which all nations are gathered into that land, and will be met by the Lord Himself in battle.

What is true historically of the earthly Jerusalem is made clear as being true spiritually of the heavenly Jerusalem. All the nations are going to be related to it. The kings of the earth will bring their glory into it, the leaves of its tree will be for the health of the nations, and it will occupy a governmental position in relation to the rest of the universe. The universality of the heavenly Jerusalem is made perfectly clear in the Word of God with a very great deal of evidence.

All this points to the Church, and says quite simply and definitely that the Church partakes of these features in a spiritual way. On the one hand, there is the distinctiveness and definiteness which amounts to exclusiveness, and, on the other hand, there is the universality which brings into relation with the whole world, with all the nations. As we have said, we must get a matter like that quite clear in our hearts and minds. How do you reconcile the two seemingly opposing factors? We shall seek to do so as we go along.

This Two-fold Character of the Church seen in and derived from: - (a) The Head.

What is it that makes the Church on the one hand exclusive, and on the other hand universal? The answer is: That which makes it universal makes it exclusive, and that which makes it exclusive makes it universal. To begin with, that which gives it its universal nature and character is the Person Who is supreme in it, and in the heavenly Jerusalem, the Church, the Lord Jesus is the central and supreme Person, and His Person is a universal Person; that is, having become Son of Man, He has come in a living way into touch with man as a race. It is not said that He is Son of Englishman, or Chinaman. He is Son of Man; and that is all-embracing, that touches man of every nation, and clime, and kindred, and tongue. So that the contact with man in any part of the world, no matter what his make-up may be, what his history may be, what his language may be, what his outlook may be, the contact of the Lord Jesus with man, of whatever stock he be, has a living appeal, a living meaning. He is different altogether from any other man who has ever been. One of the marvels of the Lord Jesus is that He has a living appeal to man, no matter how you find man, or where you find him. He is the Saviour of all men. His salvation applies to every race, and every tongue, and every make-up. That cannot be true of any other man. When we go with the Gospel to other countries, very often what is met with is this: Oh, you are English (if it be an Englishman), and your way of thinking, your outlook, is altogether different from ours, and you cannot expect to put us into an English mould of thought, and disposition, and outlook. The door is closed, if the Gospel be presented on that level. Such a procedure affords no hope. It has proved to be disastrous again and again, when the Church has been brought out of its heavenly realm down on to an earthly level, and people of other nations have been striven with to take that mould of the Church that has been brought to them from another country. It cannot be done.

The Lord Jesus can constitute in any place on this earth a company of those who take their character from Him, and in so doing form what is universal. That is to say, He supersedes all national distinctions, and all differences of temperament and constitution, so that there comes about, by reason of a vital union with a central Person, a universal, spiritual Church which is above the nations, and so heavenly, spiritual, and universal. It is the Person with Whom the relationship is brought about Who occasions the universality of the Church. But unless Christ is kept in the central and the supreme place, and the one object of pursuit is conformity to Christ, you can never realise the Church of the Word of God. But with Christ given His place, and His getting really into the life and into the heart, all the other problems solve themselves, and the Church comes into being. Put anything in the place of Christ, even the Church itself, or what may be called the Church, and you destroy its universality and make it something local, something national, something earthly, and therefore something limited in its spiritual value.

The universality of the Church, as brought about by the Person, and living relationship to Him, creates the exclusiveness. That is not a contradictory but a complementary statement, for no one can enter into the Church except by coming into a living relationship with the central Person, the Lord Jesus Christ, and immediately, Christ is found to be a boundary as well as a universal centre. This fact will further be seen to affect not only the matter of entrance into the Church but also that of spiritual development in the Church. We can only grow as we are members of the spiritual Church, the Body of Christ, and the Church itself as a whole can only grow and develop in a spiritual way in so far as Christ becomes its life. Our difficulty is that we get mental pictures of a certain defined circle, when we really ought to be seeing that this is a spiritual matter, and that the Church is not only an area marked off, and you may be in it or outside of it, but that the Church is a spiritual state rather than a place, and that "state" determines how far we are livingly in the Church, and the measure of our conformity to Christ.

For my part, I believe that is why we have the distinction in the Word of God between Zion and Jerusalem. While the words are interchangeable, and are very often used of the same place, nevertheless there is a distinction between them. Zion is Jerusalem ideally, as God thinks of Jerusalem. Zion is the word used when God's full Church is in view. Jerusalem may fall short of Zion, may be less than Zion. Jerusalem may represent things as you find them; Zion represents things as God would have them. That difference is very marked in the Word. So that if Zion represents the full thought of God, God's desire is that Jerusalem should take its character from Zion. Bringing that into our own lives, it means that we are partakers in God's thought for Jerusalem just in so far as we are conformed to God's ideal as represented in His Son, the Lord Jesus. Churchmanship is not a matter of coming within a certain defined limit; Churchmanship is a matter of relationship with the Lord Jesus, and of spiritual condition. Failure to have come to that relationship and spiritual condition means exclusion from the Church. You see how destitute of truth the common idea of the Church is, the idea that you can belong to the Church if only you give assent to certain doctrinal propositions, and go through certain rites or ordinances. It is a completely false conception of the Church. The Church is Christ in corporate expression, and membership of the Church is membership of Christ, and our value as members of the Church is determined by the measure of Christ to which we have come. Christ is universal in His Person, and therefore the Church, related to Him, becomes universal, in the sense that it touches life at every point, and in every condition, in a living way; not in a formal way, but in a living way; as an application, an appeal, and a living touch, by reason of Christ being expressed in and through it.

(b) The Cross.

Another thing which constitutes its universality, and at the same time its exclusiveness, is the Cross of Christ. The Cross of the Lord Jesus was a universal thing. No realm has been untouched by that Cross. Is sin proved to be a universal thing? Then the Cross is universal; it touches sin universally. Is man's fallen condition universal? Then the Cross is vitally related to that. All that the Cross stands for is found, and proved, to be of universal application, universal meaning. The only way into the City is by way of the Cross. That means that the Church is universal in its value, in its testimony, in its appeal, in its call, in its invitation; none need be excluded, though at the same time it is impossible to be in it except by way of the Cross. It is universal, and at the same time exclusive.

(c) The Life.

The third thing which bears the same feature is the life which Christ gives to His own. That is a universal life. It is not like other kinds of life. There are other kinds of life, which are limited in their range. Human life is limited. It belongs to man. No one else has human life but man. There is animal life in the lower sense. Life which animals have is a lower order of life; it belongs to animals. There is vegetable life, a still lower order of life; it belongs to that kingdom. These are watertight kingdoms, and the vegetable cannot pass through into the animal, and the animal cannot pass through into the human. So far as the life is concerned, they are exclusive, self-contained. Divine life is another kind of life. When it is given, and becomes the basis of man's life, there is something which he has in common with all children of God, whatever the differences are. He has a common foundation. It is that common foundation which makes fellowship possible, and makes everything real in relation to the Lord; that mighty, working, Divine life, energising, springing up within, gravitating backward to its source in God; and as it gravitates backward to its source it takes its object with it. It is the working of Divine life that brings men out of all nations, and all tongues, and all kindreds, and all temperaments, into a oneness, a universal Church. It is the Divine life in every member, making one Body.

(d) The Holy Spirit.

What is true of the Head, and the Cross, and the life, is true, in the fourth place, of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, Himself indwelling all who are in Christ through the Cross, constitutes a universal Church. The universality of that Church is only maintained in its expression as the Holy Spirit is allowed to govern and dominate. Immediately man begins to rule in the Church its universality is upset, and it becomes something legal, a divided thing. But while the Holy Spirit has free course, and absolute dominion, He maintains that principle of the universality of Christ, and preserves the Church as a thing without barriers, without those hindrances to full fellowship which come about when man takes the place of the Holy Spirit.

These things, as you see, bring the balance, the harmony, of the two factors, universality on the one hand and exclusiveness on the other hand, because none can ever enter into the Church, into the heavenly City, save as he comes under the government of the Holy Spirit.

The Counterfeit of the Truth.

This great fact of the universality of the Church is so tremendously important as to have provoked every kind of effort on the part of the enemy to destroy it, and he has moved mainly along two lines. Firstly, he has wrought along the line of counterfeit universality, and then along the line of earthliness, resulting in divisions, and a false kind of exclusiveness.

As to counterfeit universality, this operates in every realm. It is seen in the social realm under the name of the brotherhood of all men. Behind that there is this subtle, evil work of the enemy to bring about a false universality. You can see it in Babylon. When they went to work to build Babylon it was in that manner: "Let us build us a city, and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven, and let us make us a name; lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth" (Gen. 11:4). What was the object? It was a universal brotherhood, to maintain the power of dominion by unity. That is Babylon: and Babylon is an evil thing.

The same thing works in the industrial world. It works, or seeks to work, in the political world, the confederation of nations. It also seeks to work in the religious world, in the great union of the Churches. But it is a counterfeit and false universality. It is not the oneness of Christ and of the Holy Ghost.

Then there is not only the counterfeit side, but there is that earthly side, where spiritual things, the things of God, are dragged down to an earthly level; handled, gripped, manipulated by man, with the result that you get divisions. All the divisions amongst the Lord's people are the result in some way or other of man's interference in the things of God. Then you get an exclusiveness amongst these divisions, which is a false exclusiveness, and not the exclusiveness of the Cross.

These are Satan's oppositions, activities, against the great universality of the spiritual and heavenly Church of Christ. We shall only know and maintain that universality as we keep away from the earth in a spiritual way; as we allow the Holy Ghost to do the governing; as our teaching is not the teaching of man, but the teaching of the Spirit; as the Cross continually operates to keep out all that which is not of God. The heavenly City is universal, but it is exclusive. That then is the Church, but for its real value it must remain heavenly and spiritual in a practical way.

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