

Re-Integration of All Things Through the Cross

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explains how the Cross is God's means for securing the foundation for His Church, dealing with conditions in the world and amongst believers, and gathering together all things in Christ.

Scripture: Romans 3:23, 1 Corinthians 1:18, Galatians 5:25, Ephesians 1:9, Colossians 2:9

Topics: "The Cross", "Redemption"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks delivers a powerful sermon focusing on the significance of the Cross in God's divine plan for redemption and restoration. Starting with the Letter to the Romans, the Cross is portrayed as the means by which God clears the way for His Church, dealing with sin and creating a new foundation for His building. The radiating lines from the Cross extend to the Corinthians, emphasizing the application of the Cross to believers' lives and the restoration of testimony within the Church. Moving to Galatians, the Cross is shown to produce a life in the Spirit, leading to a true spiritual Christianity. The sermon concludes with insights from Ephesians and Colossians, highlighting the central role of the Cross in gathering all things in Christ and restoring the fullness of God in His Church.

Transcript

In this concluding chapter we shall make little further reference to Isaiah's prophecies. We shall seek first of all to sum up, or review, the whole matter that we have been considering, and then to present a few additional thoughts arising out of the Letters to the Ephesians and Colossians.

I would like you to draw a mental picture. Imagine, first of all, the Letter to the Romans laid down as a background, and then, superimposed upon it, a figure of the Cross. We have seen that the Letter to the Romans sets forth the Cross as God's instrument for clearing the ground for His building, providing the place for the foundation of that great building which has ever been in His thought and His intention--the Church.

Romans

The Letter to the Romans finds the ground covered at the beginning with very much upon which God will not build--upon which He cannot build. As God surveys the human scene, with a view to laying the foundation for His Church, His glorious Church, He finds a condition of things so tangled, so evil, so false and so wrong, that He says: 'I cannot lay My foundation on that, we must clear that all out of the way. We must set fire to it, consume it, and make a great clearing for this foundation.' And so, in the Letter to the

Romans, the Cross is brought in and set forth as that which, on the one side, disposes of that whole state of things. And what a state it is! What a terrible condition is presented in the early chapters of that letter! The Cross is placed there to deal with it all, to get rid of it all, to consume it all. It is like the great brazen altar with its consuming fire, bringing everything to judgment, and leaving nothing but a clearing, an emptiness, a barrenness.

But then on the other side, God having laid His foundation, with the remaining chapters of that Letter a new prospect comes into view. Everything now is possible for God. We found in chapter 8 so much said about God's eternal counsels and foreknowledge, His wonderful thoughts and conceptions in election, in predestination, in adoption, in conformity to the image of His Son; the creation redeemed from corruption, the children of God delivered from bondage. Everything now seems to have come in for realizations, since the Cross has cleared the way.

That, then, is the first thing in the mental picture that I am asking you to draw: the Cross, as God's means for securing the foundation for everything else.

1 Corinthians

Now, from that Cross you draw radiating lines. The first line reaches to the First Letter to the Corinthians. Here the Cross is applied--not now to conditions in the world, not to those outside of Christ--but to conditions amongst believers that do not tally with the Cross. The Apostle brings the meaning of the Cross to bear upon the natural man, the carnal man, and all his works, upon all that has resulted from his presence amongst the Lord's people--the divisions, and all the rest of that horrible situation in the Church that is described in the First Letter. He says: 'When I came to you, I determined to know nothing among you, save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified' (1 Cor. 2:1-2). So the first 'radiation' from Romans is to all conditions inside the church that are not in agreement with the meaning of the Cross. God cannot get on with building until those things are dealt with.

We find the Apostle telling the Corinthians in that First Letter that the foundation is already laid: 'I laid the foundation, as a wise masterbuilder, and others build thereon; but let every man take heed what he builds thereon' (1 Cor. 3:10). The things that we find in that letter, as we have pointed out, are the things to which God says: 'No, you must not put those on My foundation. My foundation is worthy of something better than that. We cannot have those things in our clearing--they will only clutter everything up once more and make it necessary for us to go through the whole business of consuming all over again. Because every man's work which is not according to the Cross is going up in flames and smoke--there will be nothing left.'

That, then, is the first outreach of the Cross as from Romans, to touch conditions amongst the Lord's people which are not in accordance with what God means by the Cross. God says 'No' to all that. 'I am not going to use that on My foundation; I am not going to build with that. You get rid of that, and then we will get on with the building.' As we saw in a previous chapter, those things were dealt with by the Corinthians themselves. The fire did burn among them--the fire of repentance, the fire of self judgment, the fire of clearing, the fire of brokenness of heart (2 Cor. 7:11). Something happened, and they dealt with those things.

2 Corinthians

The second radiating line leads to the Second Letter to the Corinthians. Here you have the great restoration of testimony in the church in Corinth--in the location, in the city and in the world. The testimony

that had been marred and spoiled can now be recovered. When God finds that state of heart, that state of spirit--broken, humble, contrite, very low before Him, 'trembling at His word' (Is. 66:2)--He can get on with things in relation to testimony in the world. That is, He can now build. When He has that, then things begin to happen outwardly--it does not require a great effort, they just do happen--because here is the expression of the mighty dynamic power of God in the midst.

The Apostle says in that letter: "It is God, that said, Light shall shine out of darkness" (or, 'Let light be', in the first creation), "Who shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). A few verses previously he says: "We... beholding... the glory of the Lord, are transformed into the same image from glory to glory" (3:18). That is the testimony: when things inwardly have been dealt with, the outshining is quite spontaneous. It is just the result of a deep, very quiet work of God. When God spoke into the first chaos His fiat: 'Let light be!', I do not think that there was a very great noise about it. There never needs to be a great noise when God puts forth His power. There is the 'hiding of His power', to use Habakkuk's phrase (Hab. 3:4). But that is not the minimizing of His power. God only needs to speak, and immense things can happen. He only said: 'Let light be!'--but look at the force and power of light in this creation. How terrific is the light!--and just from a word. It is symbolic.

But here at Corinth, the light shines out when God has right conditions; and that is how it will be. There need not be the great noise of publicity, of advertisement, of organization, of tremendous excitement and feverish activity. If the testimony is there, people will know it, people will feel it. If the conditions are right, something will happen. And if there is nothing happening, then we had better look to our conditions.

Galatians

The third line radiating from the Cross, as we saw in our last chapter, takes us to the Letter to the Galatians, where we are shown the resultant life in the Spirit. The Cross produces a life in the Spirit: it brings about a true, spiritual Christianity, as distinct from a merely professional, formal or ritualistic kind of Christianity that is all on the outside. This mighty thing, a true spiritual Christianity--a life in the Spirit: how real, how effective it is! That is what we reach when we come to the Letter to the Galatians. It says that the Cross works out in a life in the Spirit, and that true Christianity is a spiritual thing.

'Ephesians' and 'Colossians'

With that brief resumé of what has gone before, we now turn to a few additional thoughts from the twin letters, 'To the Ephesians' (so called), and 'To the Colossians'. It is quite evident that they are twin letters: you cannot read them without finding that you are covering very largely the same ground, only with a distinctive emphasis in each. And in them you come to some tremendous things.

Notice, first of all, that in these letters, as in all the others, the Cross is the foundation. In Ephesians, we are told that 'we who were dead in trespasses and sins were quickened and raised together with Him' (2:1, 5-6): the Cross is there. In the Letter to the Colossians, we read of "...the putting off of the body of the flesh, in the circumcision of Christ, having been buried with Him in baptism" (2:11-12)--here you have the Cross again. The Cross is basic, that is the point. It is the foundation carried over from Romans.

Then, when you recognize that, you come upon what I think we may say are the two greatest things that have ever been disclosed by God. They are such wonderful things, that, if we really see them, not as in the Bible to be read, but as a reality in the heart, something is bound to happen to us.

Have you ever come upon something in the Word of God which has just overwhelmed you, carried you away? Perhaps I can illustrate this by a humorous little incident that occurred during ministry in the Far East. I was speaking in a meeting one day--of course by interpretation--when suddenly the dear brother at my side, who was interpreting for me into Chinese, went off into fits of uncontrollable laughter! There he was--he just could not stop laughing; and then the people caught it, and went off into laughter likewise! Well, this dear brother could not get back, he tried and struggled, but the more he struggled, the more he seemed to lose his control. I was not conscious of having said anything extraordinary--at least, nothing that would occasion such mirth. I had to wait, and wonder what it was all about--wondering what on earth I had said to cause this. And even a little later on, when he had recovered somewhat, and we had got away from that, the thing came back to him, and off he went again; and this happened more than once.

So afterward, when I had got him alone, I said: 'Look here, brother, what ever did I say? what did I say to cause you to go off like that, and all the people too? Did I say something so outrageous, so terribly funny to you?' He said: 'No, brother, no, nothing like that. It was just something we had never seen before, that is all; we had never seen that before!'

The point is this: it is possible to see something in the Word of God which carries you right away--it is so absolutely fresh, so new! The Lord deliver us from becoming so familiar with it all that it never provokes anything, it never stirs anything in us. It ought to be with us as it was with those dear Chinese friends.--But that is by the way. When we come to these letters, if we have our eyes really opened, we come to things that are calculated to take our breath away, really to carry us right out of ourselves: for they are very wonderful things indeed. Perhaps when I mention them they will be so familiar that they will not stir you at all; but I cannot at any time reflect upon them without being tremendously moved. The language of them is indeed familiar, but may the Lord bring home to us something of the real impact and meaning of these words again. Let us, then, see what is the key to and the sum of this letter, that is called the Letter to the Ephesians.

Ephesians: "All Things in Christ"

Amidst all the wonderful fulness which is in this letter--and it is a very full letter indeed; almost every clause carries us out of our depth--there is a small fragment, which gathers the whole of the letter into itself; which really reveals what it is all about, what it all means. It is always very helpful to be able to get hold of something like that which contains everything. Here it is: "...the mystery of His will... which He purposed in Him unto a dispensation of the fulness of the times, to sum up all things in Christ, the things in the heavens, and the things upon the earth; in Him, I say..." (1:9-10). "To sum up all things in Christ". That phrase 'sum up' does not perhaps fully convey what the Apostle really meant and was saying. It goes as far as it can, but it might be better to say: 'to gather together (or better still: to subsume) all things in Christ'.

Human Disintegration

When sin came in through Adam, a great process of disintegration commenced. First of all, it began in the man himself: the man was no longer a single entity, he was a divided personality. And every child and son of Adam is a divided personality; there is civil war in his very nature, in his very constitution. He is a divided man, a man who is in conflict within himself. Is not that true of all of us? We know enough about ourselves to know that there is nothing in our natures, our make up, our constitution, that speaks of complete harmony. There is war within us--war in our make up; war in our temperament; war in our whole

constitution. We are broken; we are divided; we are disintegrated. That happened in the man himself.

And then it happened between the first two--the only two--the man and his wife. You can discern the elements of disintegration and disruption between them: the man starts blaming the woman, and that is the beginning of a domestic schism. There had been a wonderful unity and harmony; they were "one flesh", it says (Gen. 2:24); but now--something has come in, and they are no longer like that. When they were driven out of the garden, they were no doubt blaming each other, saying, 'This is all your fault!' We are familiar with that sort of thing--recriminations and so on. Division has come between them; there is a strain in life.

And then what of the family which came through them? Here you have Cain and Abel, the first children, involved in schism, division, disintegration, even to the point of murder. And out from the family, the thing spread to the race, until there ensued the great scattering, the dividing up of the race into its many, many parts, with all its diversity of languages, as we have it today. The whole race is broken to pieces, in a condition of utter disharmony. You pursue that through, and, before you are out of the Old Testament, you find the whole race divided into two irreconcilable sections, Jew and Gentile, hating each other with bitter hatred. The Jew will have nothing to do with the Gentile, calls the Gentiles 'dogs'--unclean things--and will have nothing to do with them. And the Gentile nations react against the Jews, as we know they have done all along and continue to do today. The present state of the human race is one of brokenness, scatteredness, discord and hatred, quarrels and strife and conflict and war. From centre to circumference it is all in pieces, and all the pieces are against one another. There is no harmony, no unity and no integration in the human race.

God's Secret

But God had a secret. He knew all about that; He knew what would happen; He knew what would come; and He devised His own way of meeting it. He had a secret in His own heart as to how He would solve this terrible problem. This secret is what Paul, in this and other letters, calls 'the mystery'. How would God do it? He would 'sum up', He would 'gather together all things in Christ'. He would make His Son the integrating Centre and Sphere of a new creation, in which all these diversities and conflicts would never again be found. That is the sum of this Letter to the Ephesians--to 'gather together all things in Christ'. I say, surely that is something to send a thrill through us, however often we may have heard it before.

And so, in that connection, three things come into view.

First of all, the Cross of Christ. You notice here that Paul says: 'the enmity was slain' (2:16). We have many conceptions and teachings on the Cross, but here is one wonderful thing, that in the Cross this enmity was taken hold of and destroyed. Where there is a true work of the Cross in any of us, that kind of national, or international, or personal, or social, or even Christian division ceases. The Cross is the instrument for dealing with all that--and it will deal with it. If the Cross really gets down to the depths of our being, the whole situation, both in ourselves and between ourselves and others, will change. The Cross does something, so that we no longer meet one another on natural ground at all. We meet one another on heavenly ground, on spiritual ground, on the ground of Christ.

Secondly, Christ Himself is the focal centre and sphere of that. We meet 'in Christ'--that is the great word: "to sum up all things in Christ". Notice how often that little phrase 'in Christ' occurs: everything is 'in Christ'. He is the centre and sphere of this wonderful new integration. "In one Spirit", says the Apostle, "were we all baptized into one body" (1 Cor. 12:13).

Thirdly, as clearly emerges from this letter, the Church is the vessel of all this. God's secret was not only that His Son would be the focal centre, but that the Church should be the vessel in which this unity should be displayed. What a tragedy that it is not more so! And yet, as I have said, where you get a true expression of the Church, this is what you find--that these disintegrating things are outside and the mighty integration of Divine love is within. You get a real testimony to the Body of Christ.

We are so familiar, of course, with the phrases and terminology. But it is a most wonderful thing to realize that, in the fulness of the times (we have not yet reached 'the fulness of the times', but I think we are getting very near to it), God purposes to gather together--not geographically and physically, but into one glorious unity of spirit--all things in Christ. God has determined to do that, and it will be a wonderful day when that purpose is realized.

'Slaying the enmity by the Cross' (2:16). Dear brother, dear sister, do give heed to this. If there is any enmity between you and another brother or sister in Christ, that is a denial of the Cross; it is a denial of Christ; and it is a denial of the Church. That is very solemn. Have you any enmity with another brother? or another sister? It says here that in the Cross enmity was destroyed! Where is the Cross--where is Christ--where is the Spirit-- where is the Church--if there is still present that which the Cross is supposed to have--yes, and in reality did-- put away? It has no place here.

In the great prayer that Paul prays in the third chapter (vv. 14-19), he says: "I bow my knees unto the Father...." Then we are a family! There you have the heart of things. And what is the chief characteristic of a true fatherhood and a true family? It is what Paul says here--it is love. Listen to what he says: "...that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; to the end that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be strong to apprehend with ALL the saints"--note that--"strong to apprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge...." There is a love in such dimensions that can do this thing, that can achieve this end of gathering together all the brokenness in Christ. It is only going to be done by that mighty, mighty love, with its breadth and its length and its height and its depth. That love is great enough to do it; but you and I have got to be strong, with all saints, to apprehend it. Apprehend that love, and God gets His end.

Colossians: The 'Fulness' Restored

We can only look briefly at the second of these 'twin letters'--the Letter to the Colossians. What is the great word, or statement, in that letter? It is this: "It was the good pleasure of the Father that in Him should all the fulness dwell" (1:19); "and in Him ye are made full" (2:10). What has happened?

First of all, at the beginning of the creation, the great Potter created, moulded, fashioned, shaped, so to speak a beautiful vessel. And as He stood back and looked at it, He said: 'It is very good.' And He filled that vessel with His fulness--what fulness He filled into the vessel of this creation! How full is the vessel of this creation, even now in its present condition--how full of the beauty and glory of God! But at the beginning it was filled with unsullied beauty and glory. And then, a great enemy came in and struck a blow at that vessel and shattered it to pieces: all that Divine, spiritual fulness leaked away--it has gone; and in its place you find, by comparison with what once was, only desolation and emptiness.

Now the Great Potter comes back, to 'make it again another vessel' as it pleases Him to make it (Jer. 18:4). Here is the vessel--the Church. This is the vessel of the Lord: a beautiful vessel, "a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing" (Eph. 5:27). As He looks at it according to His own thought and His own ideal, pondering all that He intends and all that He will realize through it, He says--'A glorious

Church! It is very good.' And in this Letter to the Colossians we see the re-made vessel now filled again with all the fulness. The vessel is mended; all the fragments are gathered together; you cannot trace the cracks and the joins; this Church as He has it here is once again a beautiful whole; and now He fills it again with all His fulness. "That ye may be filled unto all the fulness of God" (Eph. 3:19), is the prayer of the Apostle. "In Him dwelleth all the fulness... and in Him ye are made full" (Col. 2:9-10). That is how it is to be.

One thing that must be underlined is this: that, while this is a process which God is seeking to work out, an end to which He is labouring, we must remember that the achievement of this great and glorious thing--this 'gathering together' again of all things in Christ, this filling of that 'gathered together' vessel with all His fulness--requires, and must have, a continuous work of the Cross. That is the challenge of all that we have been seeing in the foregoing pages: the challenge of the Cross in everything, in relation to the great purpose of God. This re-integration, if the Lord is allowed to have His way, will be effected by means of the Cross. If there is anything contrary to integration, to oneness, it will always be traceable to something which has withstood, or is withstanding, the work of the Cross. That applies in our own lives, and it applies in our assemblies, our fellowships, our companies. If there is something that still represents disintegration, dividedness, schism; if things are broken, are not one entity, not one whole, it can be traced to a failure to allow the Cross to do its work in some direction or other. That is the inclusive, and the only, explanation. If the Cross really does its work, this integration will spontaneously result.

The way of unity is not the way of patching things up from the outside--the way of unity is the work of the Cross in the life. When the Church really allows the Cross to get to work in its very constitution, the problem of division is solved. And if there is spiritual poverty, if there is scarcity, if there is limitation in our spiritual resources, and we are not knowing this fulness, it is for the same reason. If the Cross works, you find that the measure increases, quite spontaneously: it always does so, when you get things out of the way that are contrary to Christ.

Conclusion

And so we finish where we began. "To whom is the arm of the Lord revealed?" If we have any interest in, or concern for, knowing God with us and for us in power, in support, in protection, in deliverance, in succour, this is the way. The answer to that question in Isaiah 53 is found in that same chapter: it is revealed to this One Who goes to the Cross, Who suffers the Cross; to the One Who lets go all in the Cross; Who goes down into shame and dishonour in the Cross; Who loses all His own in the Cross: to Him the arm of the Lord is revealed. And it is revealed to all those who go that way with Him. History is the great proof of it. Throughout history, God's arm has been, and ever will be, bared for His Son, and for all those who are with His Son as crucified men and women--crucified churches--a crucified Church.

There is a passage of which we are all very fond: "The eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to show Himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward Him" (2 Chron. 16:9). The Cross is the instrument for testing whether our hearts are perfect toward the Lord, or whether we have personal interests, or worldly interests, or divided interests in any way. That word 'perfect' means 'complete' or 'whole': the Lord will show Himself mighty on behalf of him whose heart is complete toward Him. And where could we find a greater embodiment of one whose heart was completely, wholly for God, than in the Lord Jesus on that Cross?

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