

Reproduction by Divine Life (John 12:24)

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Church grows by Life, through the entering into Life of one soul or more, and the Lord expands His Church.

Scripture: Matthew 16:25, John 12:24, John 15:5, Romans 6:4, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 4:15-16, Philippians 1:21, Colossians 1:27, 1 Peter 1:23

Topics: "Sacrifice", "Reproduction of Life in Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that true reproduction of life in Christ requires sacrificial yielding, as illustrated in John 12:24, where a grain of wheat must die to bear fruit. He explains that the essence of Christian life is not merely to exist for oneself but to propagate the life of Christ through self-denial and acceptance of His death. The church's growth is rooted in the living expression of Christ's life within believers, rather than through imitation or doctrinal systems. Sparks asserts that ministry arises from the life of Christ in individuals, and true church order is a manifestation of this divine life. Ultimately, the growth of the church is contingent upon living as life channels, allowing Christ's life to flow through them for reproduction and increase.

Transcript

An organism is never an end in itself... and is never something for itself. It is a means to a larger end - a channel for larger purposes - and the object of an organism is to reproduce itself by life. That reproduction is always sacrificial. It always costs. It is always by the vessel's yielding up of itself in some way. That is to say, death is the way to increase. Reproduction is sacrificial. That brings us to the passage of Scripture in which the Lord summed up everything with regard to His future relationship with His own... and the result of His having come into this world:

"Except a grain of wheat fall into the earth and die, it abideth by itself alone; but if it die, it beareth much fruit. He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal." John 12:24

Unless a life propagates, it remains without being marked by any purpose. It is an end in itself, and God never meant any organism to be that. It saves its own life by letting it go so that increase may be the result. The law of increase is sacrifice - "Except a corn of wheat fall into the earth and die..." There is no propagation, there is no increase, there is no reproduction except by letting all that is merely personal go... in the interest of what is other and more.

This then leads us to several things. The first is the meaning and value of Christ risen as an inward Life.

Christ risen is shown to be a reality for inward expression, inward experience. The risen Life of the Lord is to be in us. Christ is to be in us by His Life... and by His Spirit of Life. The inward meaning and value of Christ risen is the reproduction of His Life in all those in whom He is, that all such as have Him dwelling in them in the power of His risen Life should be an expression of Christ in Life - should manifest Him in the power of the Life. It is reproduction of the Christ Life in us.

The law of that reproduction in us is that we ourselves should die - should accept the place of death - so that all personal life, personal interest, is entirely put away - is shed - is parted with... and Christ becomes all. That is what Paul meant when he said, "I have been crucified with Christ, yet I live; yet no longer I, but Christ liveth in me." Here is the expression of Christ produced because all life that is not of Christ has been yielded to the Cross - has died. It has fallen into the grave of the Lord Jesus, and out of the grave of the Lord Jesus there has come an expression of Him.

In our union with Christ in His death, we cease and He begins; and from the beginning He becomes the all. That is a progressive thing, as well as a basic thing. It is a thing all-inclusive in its meaning - in its intent - but it is also progressive. We have to accept the fullness of that thing in an act. We have to take the position quite definitely and consciously that now, in accepting our union with Christ in His death, this is to work out in our having no more place at all... that whenever we come into evidence we shall be smitten - we shall be put aside - we shall not be allowed to go on.

We have to accept once for all in a definite act of commitment that from henceforth everything that is of self is going to be smitten unsparingly with that Cross... and that, whenever self comes in, it will not be allowed to have a standing. We had better settle it once for all... and have a dealing with the Lord on that inclusive, comprehensive, and utter ground... that He will make real His own meaning in that; not our understanding of it - not our grasp or apprehension of it - not what we think to be the "I" which is to be forbidden - but what He knows to be the "I"... not the measure of our knowledge of ourselves, but His knowledge of us. There will be revealed a very great deal more that is "I" than has ever entered our thought or imagination. Self, then, not as we know it but as He knows it through and through, is to be brought under the power of that Cross: and this we accept in an act.

Then it becomes progressive. To die daily, to be always bearing about in the body the dying, or the deadness, of the Lord Jesus, so that His death is a working thing every day by which self is denied, is the issue of our initial acceptance. But as that takes place - that sacrificial yielding over to the Cross - the Life of Christ is being reproduced. By the power of His own Life He is increasing while we decrease. We shall never meet a challenge to set ourselves aside but what, in meeting that challenge and answering to it, there will be the occasion for an increase of Christ. Everything which demands that we accept a fresh measure of the meaning of His death means that, as we accept it, there will be a larger measure of Him in risen Life.

So that the meaning and value of Christ risen as an inward Life is reproduction, and there is no other way. There is no way to make Christians according to the New Testament but that way. The increase of the number of the Lord's own is not by joining something from the outside; it is by coming to the Cross and dying. That is the only way. There is no Christian on any other ground than that he died with Christ and has been raised together with Him.

The second thing is the necessity for everything to be of a living character.

It is contrary to the mind of God to systematize Christianity, Christian truth, Christian order... and appropriate it or apply it as a system. It must be the issue and outcome of Life. Reproduction is only by Life. It is not by truth as a system of doctrine. Reproduction is not by the setting up of some Christian order. It is by Life. And herein is the necessity for everything to be of a living character. If Christ is to be multiplied (using that word in the right sense - and not one of us will think that we mean that there will be a multiplication of Christs in any literal sense), it can only be through everything being living - of a vital order.

That brings us to the third thing, which will to some extent elucidate and explain what we have just said: the nature of the Church.

What is it that constitutes the Church? The Church is not constituted upon the Christian creed, nor upon a set of beliefs, nor by assent to certain doctrinal propositions. The Church is not constituted by asking people to join it - become members of it - adherents, but the Church is constituted by the transmission of the risen Life of the Lord. Reproduction is its law of increase.

Increase may be brought about in two ways. One is the way of imitation. You can turn out so many things as by a mold; that is, by making so many things on the same pattern and thus increasing, multiplying, by imitation. It hardly needs saying that such is not the New Testament way with regard to the growth of the Church. That is not the New Testament way of reproduction.

The other way is by conception; that is, the outgrowth of life from within, the form which life takes when it expresses itself - when it has its way. It is inward rather than outward. The difference between imitation and what is conceived is the difference between what is dead and what is alive. One is made, the other is born; and the constitution of the Church is the result of the activity and energy of a Life, the Lord's own risen Life... being transmitted, passed on. Whatever you may develop, you will never get a development of the true Church unless the risen Life of Christ is operative and is there in sufficient measure to be transmitted by the Spirit.

The same law holds good as to the order of the Church. It is the result of His Life. Again, two kinds of things are possible. You can appoint to office and set apart with certain titles and names which represent certain spheres of activity or kinds of work and responsibility. You can elect or vote into such office or position and proceed along that line, setting up the Church order.

Or you can follow another line and be ruled by the law of life, whereby account is taken of the working and expression of the Lord's Life in the members of the Church - of the way in which the members, by that Life, begin to show marks of certain spiritual ability. Ability is coming out and manifesting itself in this way or in that way; and in due course, by a spontaneous expression and by the result of the Life of the Lord having its way in such members, the Church is compelled to take account of the fact that such-and-such in its midst are spiritually qualified... and that as spiritually qualified they are already, by the very operation of this Divine Life, the fit and proper persons for such-and-such ministry.

The expression of Life comes out perhaps in a ministry of teaching, or in a ministry of administration. It is not just natural ability. It is not the result of natural advantages - of training and so on - but there is the spiritual mark about it. Then the Lord's people take account of it and say: Well, evidently the Lord has gifted so-and-so in this way, and we must take account of it and allow that to have its expression. Thus the Church comes into its order along the line of Life.

A question may present itself to us in connection with the familiar passage in Ephesians: "He gave some apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints unto the work of ministering..." When the Lord did that, did He announce to the Church what He had done? Did He say, Now I have definitely given into your midst so-and-so as your apostle, as your prophet, as your evangelist, as your pastor and teacher? Did He say, Now so-and-so is a teacher in your midst? Or was His gift in the first place secret, only manifesting itself as these believers respectively went on with Him... and it became noticed that they were developing in certain ways? Was it like that? I think that is the truth, speaking generally. As the fruit of obedience, the perpetuation of His heavenly order was not mechanical, not official, not ecclesiastical... but vital, living, spiritual. True order is the expression of Life.

That is tremendously important. The Lord does not leave it in our hands to appoint our ministers - to make either the ministry or the minister. The Lord develops ministry by Life, and where the Lord develops ministry the church has to take notice. It may be perfectly true that the appointment has been made by God, but it may be equally true that it has to be made manifest by Life before it comes to function. I believe that is partly why Barnabas and Paul were detained at Antioch so long. Paul was definitely called and chosen. There was no doubt whatever that heaven had ordained him as an apostle, and all the signs of an apostle were in him - the supreme sign being that he had seen first hand the risen Lord. Yet with the sovereign choice, and with the personal commission to him, he had first to go into Damascus to be told what he should do as one in the church, the assembly; and subsequently he had to tarry at Antioch as a member of the assembly there for over a year.

Even then the Lord did not come to Saul or to Barnabas, his companion, and say, Now go out to the work to which you know I have called you - the work of which I have told you - the work for which you were chosen! Go out and get on with it! The Lord gave direction through the leading members of that assembly: "Separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them." And the church was able to do that, not simply on the basis of a command, but because it had been proved in their own midst that these men were called for this ministry. They had revealed in the assembly by Life that they were called to a ministry. That is the way by which the Lord reveals His ministers.

That brings us to this point: You do not know what your ministry is save as you go on with the Lord. You may have been Divinely ordained - sovereignly chosen. There may be related with your life a ministry of great value. You may not know anything about it yet, but it may be perfectly true that the Lord could say that you are a chosen vessel unto Him; but you will only discover what your ministry is as you go on with the Lord in Life.

As the Lord's Life increases in you, and your communion with the Lord goes on unhindered in all its meaning and value, then you will discover that the Lord is moving in you in a certain direction and that you are becoming exercised unto a certain ministry. None of us really discerns his ministry by being told beforehand. We only know it as we go on with God and His Life has its way.

That is an important thing, for ministry hangs upon Life. It does not rest upon mechanical appointment. We cannot make ministers. It is only the risen Christ who can make ministers, and He makes them in the power of His risen Life. Disaster lies before the man who tries to be a minister without the risen Life of Christ. The Lord deliver us from ever trying in any way to be ministers without its being the outcome of His Life in us. The Life of the risen Lord takes its own form - expresses itself in its own way - according to the mind of Him whose Life it is.

We have already touched upon this, but let us repeat and re-emphasize that the growth of the Church is on the principle of Life. We can never go about this world gathering people together, asking them to accept certain things which we say about Christ, and then forming them into churches. The Lord has not called upon us to form churches. That is not our business. Would to God men had recognized the fact. A very different situation would obtain today from what exists, if that had been recognized.

It is the Lord who expands His Church, who governs its growth. What we have to do is to live in the place of His appointment in the power of His resurrection. If, in the midst of others, the Lord can get but two of His children, in whom His Life is full and free, to live on the basis of that Life and not to seek to gather others to themselves or to get them to congregate together on the basis of their acceptance of certain truths or teaching - but simply to witness to what Christ means and is to them - then He has an open way. As witness is simply and livingly borne in this way, one and another will be provoked at length to say: I do wish I had what they have! And another will say: I covet that one's experience. It is just what I have been seeking for! Such as these will either come to inquire the way of salvation, or opportunity will be found to lead them to the Lord. It is in this way that the Church grows.

Its growth may be furthered at a street corner as you preach Christ and someone responds; and believing on Christ with the heart and confessing Him as Lord with the mouth, Life is given by the Spirit and that one becomes the Lord's. The Church is not increased by your going and taking a building and trying to get people to come to it... and to your meetings... and then forming them, by a church roll, into a local church. That is not the way. Growth is by Life; and this, to begin with, may be by the entering into Life of but one soul... and then, after a long waiting time, of another; or it may be more rapid. But the point is that it is increase because of Life. That is the growth of the Church.

For the growth of His Church the Lord must have Life channels - Life centers. I believe that, given a Life center, sooner or later one of two things will happen: that it will be abundantly manifest that Christ is fully and finally rejected there, or else there will be an adding - a growth. There is tremendous power in life, and the Life of the Lord either kills or quickens. It depends on the attitude taken toward it. He is a savor of Life unto Life, or of death unto death. Things can never remain neutral. What the Lord needs is Life centers.

The irreducible minimum, and yet the adequate means, to begin with is two - two who are one in His Life, two in whom there is cooperation in that Life. He sent them forth two by two. That is the nucleus of the Church. It is such as these that the enemy will endeavor to kill, to quench, or to separate... and thus to ruin them spiritually so far as their value to the Lord for propagation is concerned. Remember that! The Lord's advantage is bound up with a fellowship of two in the one Life.

We can see now why in the main issue it is so important that all the resources of the risen Lord should be tapped by us - should be lived upon - drawn upon... why these spiritual, secret, heavenly resources of His Life, His fullness, should thus become the basis of our lives. Their purpose does not end with ourselves, nor is it something for ourselves; and if we turn them to that end, we shall die. That provision is for the Lord's end, which is reproduction - the reproduction of His own risen Life.

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