

# The Church as a Functioning Body

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The church must give attention to the matter of worship and become a worshipping people, and must take up a militant attitude for worship and resist all that would draw away from God.*

**Scripture:** John 4:20

**Topics:** "Worship", "Spiritual Conflict"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the church's role as a functioning body centered on worship, which he describes as the supreme function of creation. He warns of Satan's ambition to receive worship, particularly through the Antichrist, and highlights the need for the church to intensify its worship in the face of this opposition. Sparks explains that true worship arises from a state of spiritual union with God, and it involves conflict as the church resists worldly influences that detract from God's rights. He concludes that genuine worship is not merely about outward expressions but is rooted in a life that reflects Christ, who alone satisfies God's requirements. The church's ultimate purpose is to glorify God by making room for Christ in their lives.

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## Transcript

Reading: John 4:20-24; Matt. 4:8-10; 2 Thess. 2:4; Rev. 13:4,8,15; 19:20; 20:4,5; Eph. 3:21.

We shall be considering certain features of the church as a functioning Body, and the first of these, and the all-inclusive one, is worship.

When we come to contemplate the matter of worship, we find that we are at once both at the centre and circumference of the universe; for the supreme function of the creation is worship. Worship is going on throughout this whole universe now, but it is divided, and much of it is not called worship, is not recognised to be worship, but nevertheless it is worship. I mean that the greater part of this world is not consciously, wittingly, willingly, admittedly worshipping. To use that word to the majority of men would be to provoke hostility, to incur some rebuff. But nevertheless it is true that, although divided and in so large a degree unrecognised, worship is going on right through this universe, and it is just there that the universe is divided. It is just on that very point that the cleavage exists.

Satan's Bid for Worship

We have read some passages which show us that worship is the supreme desire and ambition of Satan. His heart is set upon being worshipped, and he goes to all lengths to realise his ambition, even to seeking to ensnare and trip up the very Son of God Himself, or to bribe Him. This ambition, this desire of Satan for worship is, as we see, headed up in the false prophet and the beast, the Antichrist, the son of perdition, Satan's false Son of God, Satan's incarnation at the end. Let us remember that the word "antichrist" does not only mean against Christ, it means also in the place of Christ. There will be something deceptive, some delusion about Antichrist that will cause multitudes of people to take him for the Christ. He is going to be found in the temple of God, setting himself up as God and being worshipped as God: and I ask you "What temple is that?" Can you find a temple in the New Testament that answers to that? Careless interpreters have said it will be the temple which will again be built by the Jews in Jerusalem. Well, there are facts to be taken account of which will, I think, very quickly explode that idea. At the time of Antichrist's manifestation, the Jews will still be in apostasy, in rejection of Christ and themselves rejected and suffering something of their tribulation, and any temple that might be built in Jerusalem by Zionism, will never be the temple of God. That is one thing. But the bigger question is as to whether even that temple will have been built by this particular time. What is the temple of God? Well, the only answer we have in the New Testament is the people of God. Among the people of God, Antichrist will gain a place of power and draw to himself that which belongs to God, draw away from Christ.

Take rationalism alone, which has gained so great and so strong a foothold among the people of God. It has set aside the Christ, and has robbed Him of His highest values. There you see the very principle of Antichrist at work. What is the false prophet, if not representative of a false ministry, a ministry which has become false to Christ in the very midst of His people? -- and there is plenty of that today. Well, that is only to mention those things, to see that the drawing of worship to himself is the one final, supreme object of Satan, and he heads that up in the Antichrist.

Now, in mentioning this, I have an object, which is to point out that, as in every other matter, what intensifies on one side toward the end, is meant to intensify on the other side toward the end. We can take it that the intensification of Satanic activity on the one side is, on Satan's part, but the offset to the intensification of God's activity on the other side. We have seen that in other respects, and here we note it in this matter. The thing which will burst forth in its fulness and finality on the divine side in the end will be worship. You see that in Revelation 12. But as we near that time this other thing is intensified, and so it becomes a very important matter for the Lord's people to give attention to the matter of worship; to recognise that the Lord would have worship intensified, would lead us to become more and more a worshipping people, a people whose supreme and all-inclusive function is worship; that is, that worship envelopes everything, carries everything along. The Lord would have His church increasingly a worshipping church. Satan's church is going to be that increasingly, and we are surely able to mark the progress of that in these days. If Antichrist represents supremely that rendering of worship to Satan which Satan so covets, then that is set over against the Christ, which means that Christ supremely represents the worship of God.

#### The Heart of Worship -- Love of the Will of God

In our previous meditations, we have thought much about the rights of God, and that the main issue between Christ and Antichrist is the rights of God. Now then, it is important for us, in connection with that conflict, and in connection with worship, to know what those rights are. Well, all-inclusively we mean, when we speak of God's rights, a state of utter abandonment to God, a state in which everything is for God, where God's pleasure and God's satisfaction is the dominating and captivating consideration; where the

mind and heart and will are governed by the good pleasure of the Lord. If the Lord Jesus is the full expression of the worship of God, and if He is the embodiment of all the divine rights, then we can sense the depth of meaning in certain familiar phrases, such as, "I do always the things that are pleasing to him." That is expressive of a life. That encompasses His life, bounds His life; His whole life is crowded into that. What is it that the Father delights in? For Him, that is the governing law and consideration in all His movements, in all His ways, in all His desires, in all His actions. Now, that is worship, and that too is what is meant by the rights of God.

I wonder if it has ever occurred to you how service and worship are, almost without exception, brought together in the Word of God. Go through the Book of Exodus with that thought. The challenge first issued to Pharaoh was, "Let my people go that they may serve me." Then you find that, as that demand and challenge was pressed, it came to take quite a definite shape. Pharaoh said, You that are men go, but leave your flocks and your herds. The answer to that was, We need them to serve the Lord with; and that thought developed until the service of the Lord came clearly to be seen as a matter of worship. And the altar was at the centre of things, and all service was related to the altar, until at length you get the development of the whole Levitical priesthood and order, which was the service of the Lord: and yet it was all a matter of worship. So that Israel, gathered up into the Levites, became a worshipping people, and their worship was their service, and their service to God was worship. Paul takes up that fact in his letter to the Romans, as you know: "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your (literally) spiritual worship." Our versions give us the rendering "your reasonable service". Spiritual worship -- reasonable service.

We have thought of the service of God as being something other; indeed many things. But the heart of service is worship, and worship is the greatest service. Now this being the case, there are one or two things that we must at once get hold of. The living creation exists for the worship of God, that is, for God's satisfaction, and that is service to God. Life therefore has to be recognised as a trust, an investment made by God with a view to getting interest, and that interest is His glory. God has given life as an investment, to come back to Him with increase. "Herein is my Father glorified that ye bear much fruit." What fruit is that? Well, taking Christ's own illustration in connection with those words, it is the expression and outworking of the life that we have in Christ; for in the vine and the branches, there is but the one life, with its fruit growing and increasing unto the glory of God. That is service. It is the result of the life, the increase of the life. God has given life as an investment.

#### Worship Demands a Certain State

Now, this worship, this service, demands among other things a certain state. It is based upon a certain spirit. That state is what is meant by the little phrase in John 4, "in spirit". True worshippers must worship in spirit. "They that worship him must worship in spirit..." That is a statement. "In the spirit": that is, in a phrase, living, spiritual union with God. It is something which is inward. You see, that is what the Lord was saying. The woman said, "Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship." The Lord Jesus, in effect, said in reply, That which is just external, outward, formal, traditional, is not true worship! True worship is in spirit, and that is something inward. It is not formal, it is not traditional, it is not external: it will come out, it will manifest itself, but it begins, it takes its rise from an inward, living union with God, and that is the result of a miracle, the result of something having happened. No one who has not known the miracle of new birth or resurrection union with the Lord can ever be a true worshipper, but such as have that knowledge, that experience, ought to be true worshippers. That is to say, the thing itself ought to be the basis of worship; it ought to spring up in

worship. The very first strain of worship ought to be because of the wonder of that which has happened in us to bring about this living union with our God. Therefore our being joined to the Lord by the initial act of the Holy Spirit ought ever to be fresh as a matter of worship. It ought always to be that which leads to spontaneous praise to the Lord; not just an act of years ago, but that going on in the wonder and glory and blessedness of an abiding reality. I am the Lord's! I am His, He is mine! That is the simple, initial basis of worship, an inward thing. We have to recognise that it is a state that gives rise to worship.

But then, alongside of that, we have to recognise that the enemy of true worship, worship in truth -- not only in spirit, but in truth -- is in our own souls as apart from that spiritual state. Running alongside that which is "in spirit and in truth", there is always that which is in soul and flesh, in untruth, that which is not true. It is all too easy for the Lord's people to move from one to the other almost without recognising they have done so. You may get a true, spontaneous uprising of worship that is in spirit and in truth, and then almost imperceptibly move out into another realm and feel that the bottom has fallen out of everything; be carried from your spirit by your emotions, from reality to something that is not real. It is possible among spiritual people to do that, and that very often happens. You will find these two strains in any prayer gathering where there is any number of the Lord's people. You get a true spiritual strain, and then that which is ostensibly or intendedly the worship of the Lord in the same way, but which in reality is something else, something not in spirit, in truth. It has come in along some other line, through some feeling, or some activity of reason. Now I say this not to make things complicated and difficult, but we are trying to get at the matter of true worship. Apart from the double strain which we may find in ourselves or amongst ourselves, you have to recognise that all that appears to be worship is not worship. There is a great deal of what is called worship which is soul worship, and not true worship, not worship in spirit and in truth. It is false. It is not of life, divine life, and therefore it leads away. Oh how this antichrist element, this in man which is according to the spirit of Antichrist, energised and directed by the enemy as it is, does seek all the time to draw away, to lead off, to stop that getting into, and maintaining of, a living touch with God, to interfere with that real hold upon the Lord! It is all very nice, but it has just the opposite effect: it draws away, it lets things down. It is there all the time.

### Worship Involves Conflict

Now, by this time we ought to know enough about the difference between soul and spirit, without my adding very much more to it, and it is not to that end that I am saying this. It is to come to this point, that worship enters into the realm of conflict, or shall I put it in the other way, conflict enters into the realm of worship. Here you have the two worships at war with each other, and it is just there that the church comes in. The church is called to be a worshipping vessel. What is worship? It is bringing to God His rights. When the Christ appears on the scene and takes up His supreme business of securing God's rights for Him, immediately Satan appears on the scene, and there is conflict. It is warfare, and warfare right to the end. The church is brought right into that, into the very purpose for which Christ came, the embodiment of divine rights, the manifestation of divine glory, the bringing to God of that which is His; to be in this universe wholly for the interests of God. Because that is the calling, the vocation and the destiny of the church, all the power of this other one who seeks worship is focussed upon the church, as it was focussed upon Christ while here in this world. That is the point of conflict with the world, that is the meaning of worldliness, namely, anything which draws away from the Lord, anything which tends to rob God of His rights. To put it the other way, anything which cedes to the Devil worship, upon which his heart is set, that is worldliness.

The church, then, comes into this conflict, and therefore the church has to come in to take up a position strongly and positively in relation to its glorious Head, to bring everything to the Lord, to draw everything to Him. Everything should be drawn toward the Lord when the church is functioning. It should all be coming back to the Lord. There is a great counter movement to draw it all away, to drag it away, to keep it away, and you meet that movement in numerous forms, especially when the church is assembled, with its one object and function to bring to the Lord. You find this counter movement expressed in numerous ways to make that function abortive and unfruitful and a merely formal thing, cold and lifeless. So the church has to take up a militant attitude for worship, and that is why you get priests in the battles of Israel; at Jericho, for example, and in many other instances. You see, the presence of the priestly element means that the worship, the glory, has to go to the Lord: it is all the Lord's rights; this is for the Lord. But it is an army, with priests at the head of it -- the militant factor related to worship. Worship can only be fulfilled through conflict. It is a real battle to secure God's rights.

Now, that is presenting truth, but what is the practical meaning of that for us? It means, beloved, that at all times, and perhaps especially when we are found together and our supreme function is worship, we have to set ourselves with deliberateness and positiveness to resist all that would draw away, all those workings of the spirit-principle of Antichrist, and set ourselves so that God shall have His rights, have all that He should have in every time. It calls us into a positiveness. I wonder if you will remember this next time we are together for prayer. I wonder if you remember this every time we meet; for the ministry of the Word is, after all, only worship. If it does not lead to things coming to the Lord for His glory, if it does not mean that the interests of the Lord are furthered, then it has all missed its object.

#### The Secret of True Worship

Before I close, I do want to say one other thing. Christ Himself is the basis of worship; for, if it is God's pleasure, God's satisfaction, which is in view with worship, what can we bring which will achieve that end? Can you and I of ourselves bring anything that will satisfy God? We know we cannot. Nothing that will satisfy God can be found in us. There is but One concerning whom the Father is able to say, "In thee I am well-pleased". Christ alone answers to all those holy requirements of God. Christ alone can bring satisfaction to the Father. Therefore if the church is to function to that end, the end of God's good pleasure and satisfaction, one thing becomes essential in the church -- and when I speak of the church, I speak of the company of individual believers united in one Spirit and one life; the term "individual" does not lose its significance in the Body -- if the church is called into that wonderful, heavenly vocation of bringing satisfaction to God and Christ alone can be God's satisfaction, the one essential thing obviously, manifestly, is that Christ will have to supplant us. We shall have to be got out of the way to make way for Christ. Now you see, we come back to our beginning.

If worship is to reach its great climax at the end, if God is going to come right into all His own; if we are nearing that time, if that day is drawing nigh, then it just means this, that God must take pains increasingly to displace that in us upon which Antichrist fastens. Therefore one of the deepest things in the dealings of God with His people toward the end is to make room for Christ, and more room and ever more room for Christ. He is putting us out progressively. He is bringing us to such weakness, such impotence, such helplessness, such inability, such foolishness, that we might well be the laughing stock of the world. We do not know; we cannot do. Is that right? Ought the people of God to be like that? Should it be that of themselves they neither know anything nor can do anything? Well, painful and humbling as the proposition may be to our natures, it is just that; and that is what is meant by losing our souls. But the point at the moment is, What is it for? Just to make room for Christ, to make more room for Christ. It is by what He is

that God is going to be glorified; by what God sees in Him, not what man sees in Him. I think that was the thing which lay behind that utterance of His, "The witness which I receive is not from man". "It is another that beareth witness of me". Men may come to their conclusions about Him; they may reach their estimate of Him; they may testify to Him; they may say this and that about Him, but their judgment of Him, whether it be good or bad, is purely a natural judgment, and it is not that that matters. Oh how utter was Christ! You know, it takes a man with a sinless humanity not to be a little bit satisfied inwardly when someone is passing a good opinion about him, saying something nice, bearing testimony to him that he is something. But He could say, What men think, good or bad, does not touch Me. I know the value of that; I know that that does not go very far; I am not going to take that on; it would put Me in an entirely false position. Today they will cry, Hosanna! Tomorrow they will cry, Crucify! Suppose I had been elated by their cries of Hosanna! where should I be tomorrow? I receive not testimony of men: I live before God.

The great thing is to live before God. Now the Lord is seeking to conform us to that image, that is, to make room for that Christ, with the result that, in Christ having such a large place in us, there is that large measure of pleasure to the Father; and the bringing of that to the Father is worship. Beloved, it is not just what we say in worship; for though our words may be a true and acceptable offering, yet what the Lord is looking for all the time, and what we must ask Him to produce in us, is a true measure of His Son. A life that is an offering acceptable to God is a life in which Christ has a large place. So that genuineness in worship is not merely sincerity of utterance, not our purity of motive, not our intensity of expression, but that which is coming out of a chastened life, out of a broken, contrite spirit; coming out of that which has been emptied, poured out, drained, weakened, bruised, to give place to the Lord, a large measure of Christ. May the Lord have that from us.

That is the church and that is what the Lord is seeking to get in us by His dealings with us, and, strange contradiction as it may seem, it is in that brokenness, that emptiness, that weakness, that bruisedness, that Satan is defeated. Oh! Satan triumphs when there is anything other than that. It is Antichrist providing him with the very kind of humanity or man that he wants, that which is not empty, not broken, not poured out, not selfless. That is Satan's strength.

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