

The Church in the Spiritual Realm

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Church is a heavenly, universal, and timeless entity that exists in a spiritual realm outside of this world order, and it is the instrument of Divine government in this universe.

Scripture: Acts 18:10, 1 Corinthians 2:15, 1 Corinthians 3:1, 1 Corinthians 12:12, 1 Corinthians 13:1, Galatians 5:6, Ephesians 1:4, Ephesians 2:6, Colossians 1:18, Hebrews 11:27

Topics: "The Role of the Holy Spirit", "Spirituality in the Church"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the vital role of the Holy Spirit in understanding the Church's spiritual nature, asserting that true spirituality is only possible through His guidance. He discusses the Church as a corporate entity that stands between individual believers and the spiritual forces at work in the universe, highlighting the need for a revelation of God's mind about the Church to achieve spiritual effectiveness. Sparks warns against equating the current state of churches with the New Testament ideal, urging believers to seek a deeper understanding of the Church's timelessness, heavenliness, and universality. He concludes that true spirituality involves recognizing the interconnectedness of all believers and the importance of spiritual discernment in overcoming divisions within the Church.

Transcript

Although we have said a great deal about spirituality, and that as to the new man and our spirit, I have not failed to recognise that all this is perfectly meaningless unless we know the Holy Spirit Himself. I trust that no one will have the impression that we are talking about our spirits only; everything is His working, everything depends upon Him, and it is by Him that spirituality, in the Divine sense, is possible. It is very necessary always to honour the Holy Spirit. We, under His government and direction in all things, and recognising His Lordship, are having to consider the matter of our own measure of spiritual life and nature, because that is a tremendously important thing, as I think we have been seeing.

In our previous meditations we were occupied with the general principle of spirituality, going on to the personal and inward reconstituting through new birth of spiritual men and women. Then we went on from the centre to the circumference of spiritual effectiveness, and saw where spirituality has its supreme registration - that is, in the realm of spiritual powers back of all things seen, the spiritual forces which are at work and which have to be met and countered - and there it is that our spiritual measure is tested and found out, when we are really up against a Satanic situation.

God's Mind About the Church

Now we are coming to what is intermediate to these two, between the centre of the personal reconstituting, and the outermost bound of its effectiveness and value. What lies between those two is corporate testimony, which has to do with the Church and the churches. In the Divine scheme of things it is the Church which is the intermediary, that which stands between and has the ultimate effect in the spiritual realm, I mean that individual Christians, though they may be born again, as individuals will not get very far in touching that outer-most realm of spiritual forces. There, a real registration has to be a corporate one. It will be the Church eventually which will be the instrument of Divine government in this universe. So it is necessary for us to spend a few minutes with the Church before we come to the churches; and of course we are continuing to keep before us the matter of spirituality. Here spirituality means what the Church is in God's mind. When we come to contemplate the Church in its wholeness and entirety, of course, we come mainly to the letters to the Ephesians and to the Colossians. There we find God's mind about the Church. We must realize the necessity for our seeing and apprehending what the Church is in God's mind, not as we find it in the churches, not as it actually is here; and we must stand on that ground, or we shall be helpless in this matter of spiritual impact. I mean that if we are going to accept what we find in the New Testament as to the churches as being the expression of all there is, we are very soon going to give up the fight, and shall not get very far. Dr. Campbell Morgan has remarked that there is often heard the word - Oh, let us get back to the New Testament church! But, he said, God forbid! - and went on to say that you will look a long way today for a Christian church that will wholly correspond in its defects to the church in Corinth. When you come to think of it, there is some truth in that. A church in which there is incest and all that you find in Corinth! - God forbid that we get back to the New Testament church if that is it! God forbid that we should say that we have made no progress from that! If we are going to accept that as the standard, we are going to be crippled, and the measure of our spirituality will be very small indeed, and therefore the measure of our impact likewise. The Apostle who was mainly responsible for these churches coming into being repudiated their condition, would not accept it, was fighting against it. Why? Because he had seen God's mind; that was his position, his vantage ground, his strength. If he had never seen God's mind and only saw this, what a disheartened, disappointed, despairing man he would be! He had seen God's mind about it.

It is the Church that is in view in these epistles, and spirituality in Ephesians and Colossians means first of all an inward revelation of God's mind about the Church. It is a tremendous thing for spiritual strength, for spiritual power, for spiritual ministry, for spiritual impact, for spiritual food - yes, for every spiritual value - to have really had a heart revelation of God's mind about the Church; not simply to have studied Ephesians and Colossians, but for it to have broken in upon your heart, to have seen it in an inward way. I say that is spirituality with an impact, it is spirituality with a dynamic; and what a dynamic it is! Look at the Apostle, He looks out at the end of his life over the churches. He knows them intimately; and he has to say - "all that are in Asia have turned away from me" (2 Tim. 1:15): they have repudiated Paul to whom, under Christ, they owed everything. He looks out; and what a spectacle, what a heartbreak! And the man in his circumstances of imprisonment and isolation and limitation, looking out on that, might well have died of a broken heart, or have sunk down into the uttermost despair and written his life off as a failure, and all his work as for well-nigh nothing. But this man is not down there, he is in triumph, he is delivered, he is saved, he is emancipated from all that. The facts are true and real, and yet he is triumphant. Why? Because he sees God's mind about the Church and he knows that, if God ever had a mind about a thing, He is going to have the thing like that; and, no matter what appearances say, in the end God will have His Church like that. God has not conceived a thing and projected it, to be cheated of it. There it is and it will be!

When you have grasped that, you are able to get closer to these letters and see the value of spirituality in general and in particular. In general, like that. A true spiritual apprehension is an emancipating thing. The spiritual is not the unreal, it is the most real of all. It is far more real than the temporal and visible. The eternal - they are the real things. You do not see this Church here on the earth; it is not seen, but it is there in the unseen with God, and it is the eternal thing. If only we saw the invisible - that is an extraordinary statement, "he endured as seeing him who is invisible" (Heb. 11:27) - if only we saw the invisible meaning, if only we saw in the spirit what can never be seen in the flesh with our natural eyes, it would be a tremendously emancipating thing, because we should see that that is the eternal thing that must be. When all else passes, that will be. Spirituality buoys you up. There is so much disappointment in the churches, in the things seen, that you might give up in disgust, close down your work and go and do some other job; but you do not do that if you have really seen. You may tell yourself that you are a fool not to face facts, that you are simply putting on blinkers, not taking account of realities; but because of something that God has done inside you cannot accept that, you must go on. You cannot accept the total ruin theory, if you have had a revelation.

The Timelessness of the Church

Then this revelation of the Church works out in particular matters, and you can see why the revelation is such a power when you come to look at these letters. You find, first of all, that spirituality as to the Church relates in particular to its eternity, or, if you like, its timelessness, for the Apostle, by the Spirit, in his letter to the Ephesians almost immediately lights upon that. This is not something which has been brought into being at some point in time. "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world": "foreordained": it goes back to a dateless point outside of time. He sees the past eternity linked with the future eternity, unto the ages of the ages. He lifts the Church right out of time and puts it where no time is, and says it has come out of that past and goes on to this future. And when you get it out there, something is going to happen. It must be, time cannot make any difference. If this were something that we created or raised up, something of mushroom growth or simply of our lifetime, started with us and finished with us, well, it is not worth the cost. Here the Apostle sees beyond the temporal aspects of the Church, and says that the Church according to God's thought is a timeless thing. So far as we are concerned, we have no date for its beginning and there is no date for its end. Of course, we cannot explain that, but there is the fact stated - and that is spirituality. The Church is in eternity, it is timeless. And when it is established with God outside of time, what can alter it? It must be! It is with God; God comes out of eternal purpose to secure in time something which is eternal; not something that belongs just to the "now" of time, but in time an eternal thing is secured. How difficult, how impossible it is to speak of these things! God coming out of eternal purpose, according to the eternal purpose which He purposed in Christ before the world was - there is something so strong about that, so settled, so fixed, so irrevocable.

Here, in this connection, is the principle of the Holy Spirit's foreknowledge and sovereignty. I can quite understand that you must have some kind of Calvinism. You may not go all the way, you may have serious reservations, but you have to have a place for something of the principle of it, because here it is. God is coming into time to secure an eternal thing according to foreknowledge and predestination, and if you want a simple explanation and application of that, listen to what the Lord said to the Apostle about Corinth. "Fear not, Paul... I have much people in this city" (Acts 18:10). Not - "I am going to have"; "I have" - before they were all saved. This shows the Spirit coming out in foreknowledge and sovereignty, so that, if He gets hold of an instrument which He can really direct, He knows to what He will direct that instrument. You see the outworking of this principle of foreknowledge and sovereignty in the life of this man Paul.

"They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden of the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; and when they were come over against Mysia, they essayed to go into Bithynia: and the Spirit of Jesus suffered them not" (Acts 16:6-7); and then the Divine intervention, Europe, Philippi. Why? We do not know why, we can only surmise. Asia is not ready, Bithynia's time has not come. Over here they are ready, there will be a response. The Spirit knows, He has foreknowledge and is acting sovereignly in relation to eternal knowledge, and the thing proves right. You see the working of this. God is not working on haphazard chances, as if He said, just go here and see if there is anything. That is not God. It may seem like that with us, but that is not God. He knows; He has come out of eternity, and a really Spirit-led ministry is almost romantic in touching need just at the time when it is ready to be touched. At any rate, that is the romance of the New Testament. The Spirit says to Philip in Samaria, "Arise, and go toward the south unto the way that goeth down from Jerusalem unto Gaza" (Acts 8:26). He goes, not knowing why. But in the foreknowledge of God there, just at that time and place, is a man, and he is just ripe, and the Lord makes a contact. God is moving out of eternal purpose, this is not just chance. But here is a tremendous principle, and you can see the operation of the law of spirituality so far as the Church is concerned, that God is working out of eternal purpose, securing an objective in time. It is something so solid, so strong. I know all the mysteries and all the problems bound up with that, but here is the fact, that God is not just working from hand to mouth. He is working with a complete foreknowledge. The Church, in God's mind, existed before its first member was born, and He knew every member before that first member was born. I say it is a strong thing for our lives, if we have seen something like that.

Of course, this does not do away with preaching, or with seeking souls, or with terrible conflict over souls. All the same, we have to come under the Spirit's hand to seek them. We have to go and preach, and very often preach at large, and not know what God has got there. It has to be done in faith, and very often we have to enter into, and go through, a terrible conflict; and yet Divine sovereignty is still the same. We might think that with Divine sovereignty working out of eternal purpose the thing will happen in any case. Ah no, it will not. We have to preach, travail, battle, seek. These two things are not contradictory, they are complementary.

The Heavenliness of the Church

We now turn to a second thought in the Divine mind concerning the Church as we find it in these letters - its essential heavenliness from God's standpoint. In the letter to the Ephesians the constant repetition is "in the heavenlies in Christ." We must seek to dismiss our natural, soulical mentality about that. I am not saying that there is no such place as a geographical heaven, but we must rule out that kind of mentality of geography, and realise that "in the heavenlies" is a spiritual principle first of all before it is anything else, and that, while it may mean that Christ is in a certain geographical location, yet spiritually it signifies a realm altogether outside of this world order.

You know quite well that two people can be side by side, as close as two can be, and yet they may be in absolutely different realms. That is the principle of heavenliness; it refers to a different spiritual realm altogether. True, it is above, elevated, higher, but that is spiritual first of all before it is anything else. It is a spiritual difference on an altogether higher level of Divine thought - not of this order, not, as we say, earthbound; it is heavenly, it is in a spiritual sense in the heavenlies in Christ.

Well, of course, that does not want explaining. You can sit in your chair and be in the heavenlies. Sometimes we sit here, and at the same time we are a long way off. I do not mean we are dreamy, but we are having a good time with the Lord, we are really in our consciousness far away. I am not talking about

the psychic now, but the real spiritual enjoyment of the Lord so that we forget the people around us; we are, to all intents and purposes, somewhere else. That is a commonplace thing in spiritual life, or I hope it is, with us.

It is a heavenly thing from God's standpoint, and it is dynamic when we have really seen it. When really it has come home to us in the power of the Holy Spirit it is dynamic, because it results in tremendous things in us first of all. Oh, what that revelation has done with some of us! When ours was an earthly conception of the Church, how we were engrossed with its ecclesiasticism, its forms and procedure! The whole system of things meant a lot to us. Then God broke in with His conception of the Church as a heavenly thing, and all this fell from us like a mantle; it went, and from that time to this we have felt how futile and petty it all is.

But that does not happen until you have seen in your heart; and I beg of you, do not go and do things merely because you hear these things said. Ask the Lord for the revelation. Do not come out of the earthly thing until God has broken in upon you as to His heavenly thing. "Come-out-ism" only makes trouble for God as well as for man. Once you see God's mind about the Church as a heavenly thing, it is emancipating, it makes tremendous challenges within and without and puts you in a place of being able to minister in a way that meets need, brings in heavenly fulness, and God comes through. In a word, it results in spiritual increase to have really seen the heavenly nature of the Church. This matter of what heavenliness is in the Church could occupy us for a long time.

The Universality of the Church

One further matter. God's conception of the Church, or spirituality, here in Ephesians concerns not only its timeliness, and its heavenliness, but its universality. How comprehensive is God's thought! In our earlier messages we have sought to show how comprehensive Christ Himself is, embodying in His own Person everything, in no way being just partial but gathering everything up into Himself, and yet standing right outside of everything. Christ, so great that no nation that has ever been, or is, or will be, will find Him unsuitable, inapplicable, but with all their differences, national traits and temperaments and constitutions, will find in Him, every one of them, the answer to their needs. He embraces all nations, He is the desire of all nations. And within nations, all the different features which mark separate individuals find their answer in Him. How comprehensive He is, how vast, and yet how different! Yes, He meets the need of the Jew, but He is not a Jew essentially; He meets the need of the Greek, but He is not a Greek essentially; He meets the need of all the Gentiles, but He is not a Gentile essentially. As Son of Man, He meets every need of every nation and tribe, and yet He is not of any one of them. No one can say - He belongs exclusively to us. You cannot find that the Jews say that Christ belonged exclusively to the Jews; He would repudiate that, and you know quite well that you dare not portray Him like that. Tisso, the great Scripture artist, when he painted his pictures on the life of Christ, painted all the figures around Christ in their particular national and local distinctiveness. A Roman was obviously a Roman in his pictures, a Jew was obviously a Jew, and so on; you do not have to be told that this man is a Jew, and that man is a Roman. When he came to Christ, he dare not give any such distinctiveness. He dare not paint him as a Jew nor as a Roman. Christ would lose His real value to all nations if you gave Him a distinctively national feature and character. He has to be portrayed in some way that is both a combination of all and yet different from all; and that was Tisso's problem which he tried to solve in that portrait. But, of course, portraiture is always a dangerous thing. My point is this, that Christ does embody all, and yet He is outside all. There is a universality about Him which gathers up all need and meets it, and yet is greater than it and different from it.

And His Body is constituted according to Himself. You cannot have an English church, a Chinese church, an Indian church, a Jewish church, a Gentile church . You cannot; it is an utter violation of the Divine conception of the Church to have anything like that. The Church, according to God's mind, is universal, it is a different kind of thing altogether from what is of the earth, and yet all will find their need met there. They will come from the East and from the West, from the North and from the South, and they will find their spiritual need met in the true Church, but not in a national "church," an earthly thing, a local thing. Oh, that it might be more like that today! That is the Divine conception, that is spirituality, and the apprehension of that is the way to real power, impact, value, effectiveness. If we have even a small approximation to that in the churches, then proportionately we achieve spiritual effectiveness and value.

Spirituality in the Churches

So much for the Church. When we come to the churches, we come to what the Church is actually - not as it is according to God's mind, but actually, and then spirituality has to be recognised along the line of formation into what is according to God's mind. Spirituality is the law of formation where things are imperfect. Coming to Corinth, what is the Apostle's word? "I could not speak unto you as unto spiritual" (1 Cor. 3:1). That is only saying in other words, The reason for your present condition, which is a deplorable one, is the absence of spirituality. Then we begin to look into the whole letter and see the marks of the absence of spirituality. We find that Corinth sets forth the great importance of certain spiritual things.

The Importance of Spiritual Insight

Firstly, the great importance of spiritual insight and knowledge for discrimination. One of the great causes of the condition there was an inability to discriminate, a mixing up of things which should never be confused but should stand far apart, belonging to two different realms altogether. That lack of the spiritual faculty for discrimination resulted in this awful condition. Let us see some ways in which that inability to discriminate operated.

(a) In Discriminating Between the Natural and the Spiritual

Firstly, it had to do with the difference between the natural (or the soulical, as it truly is in the Word) and the spiritual; the world on the one hand, and the heavenly order and standards on the other. They were mixing up world standards with heavenly standards - note all that is said in 1 Cor. 1 and 2 about the wisdom and the power of this world. They were very much interested in the matters of wisdom and power. They desired to gain ascendancy, to be in a position of influence; and their idea of ascendancy and influence and power was the worldly idea, the wisdom of the rulers of this world. They were therefore evidently indulging in studies of the philosophies of the Greeks, systems of thought and interpretation of the universe. They were thinking that, if you advanced enough in this wisdom, you would get to the heart of things, you would solve all problems, and come into a place of competence and power and influence. They could not discriminate between the wisdom of this world and the wisdom of God, and so the Apostle writes to them such things as these - "The world through its wisdom knew not God" (1:21). "God's wisdom... which none of the rulers of this world hath known; for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (2:7-8). "Hath not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?" (1:20). These people were unable to discriminate. This all seems to us very elementary. How far back they must have been!

And the same with power. They were after strength and power, and they were going to have it on the world's line. So he says, "Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God" (1:24). But - in substance he

adds - you cannot see it, you cannot discriminate. You notice what he is saying about discerning, judging - that word so difficult of translation. "He that is spiritual judgeth" (discerneth, examineth) "all things, and he himself is judged of no man" (2:15) - he is inscrutable. The spiritual is inscrutable to the natural. These people were not able to discriminate, hence this confusion. Spiritual discernment and ability to discriminate between things that differ but which often seem to be very alike is a tremendous thing to bring the Church to God's idea of the Church. We do need spiritual discernment and understanding in the Church, to save the Church from its present deplorable state. You know how true that is, how very few Christians have real discernment. It is an essential spiritual factor to bring the Church to God's idea of the Church; without it, you get the Corinthian condition.

(b) In Recognizing Relatedness of All Ministries in the Body

Secondly, in the relationship and the appraisal of Christ and His servants. "I could not speak to you as unto spiritual." Why? Well, "there are divisions among you," and those divisions are of this kind - "Each one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ" - making parties; and the failure here was their inability to see that the Body is one, with Christ as its Head, and that if there is a Paul ministry or an Apollos ministry or a Peter ministry that they liked so much and preferred above others, it is only the ministry of a member of the Body and not something in itself, detached. The hand has a function in the body and you cannot take it over there in a corner. You dare not detach any member of the body and circle round that. If you do, you have no conception of the body and you have no conception of Christ. That is what these people needed to see, and had not the spirituality for seeing. This Body is one, these servants of God are members of the Body functioning in their own appointed ways, and they are all essential, they all make up one Body, and Christ is that Body. "So also is the Christ" (1 Cor. 12:12). But the Corinthians were, in effect, tearing the Body to pieces and making a church round one member of the Body. "There are divisions among you." Spirituality in this case sees the oneness and wholeness of the Body, and any particular ministry not as something apart and detached, to be taken up and circled round and made something of in itself, but a contributory factor to the whole, which the rest can no more do without than it can do without the rest. It sees the relatedness in the Body of all its functions, its ministers, and its ministries, that they are one and all interdependent. Failure to see that results in chaos in the Church. You would not have had half of what there is today in the divisions of Christendom if there had been a spiritual apprehension of the Body of Christ. Wherever it is corporately found, you will be coming back to the Divine idea, and there will therefore be a spiritual power and spiritual fulness.

(c) In Discriminating Between Spiritual Gifts and Spiritual Persons

Thirdly, there was at Corinth the spiritual inability to discriminate between spiritual gifts and spiritual persons. In 1 Cor., if one thing is clear it is this, that spiritual gifts are not necessarily evidence of people being spiritual - that you can, in this real sense, be a very unspiritual person and have spiritual gifts. You will find that spiritual gifts may, and very often do, only relate to spiritual infancy, and not to spiritual maturity. The possession of such gifts may run side by side in the same life with very serious moral defects. This is a problem, this is startling. But it was so at Corinth. As in no other church, spiritual gifts are in evidence there: or, at any rate, are spoken of: and in no other church are there so many disorders - and worse than that. They could not see the difference between spiritual gifts and spiritual persons. Why should Paul head this whole matter of gifts right up into chapter 13? What is the meaning of chapter 13 if it is not this? "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am become sounding brass, or a clanging cymbal." Is he suggesting an impossible thing? Is this a merely hypothetical conjecture which has no reality in life or experience - that a man can speak with the tongues of men and of

angels and have not love, and, being like that, be sounding brass or a clanging cymbal? Speaking with tongues - surely tongues are the ultimate thing, a great evidence of spirituality? Not at all! The supreme feature of spirituality is Divine love. God is love, and we are to be made perfect in love. "Faith which worketh by love" (Gal. 5:6) - this is maturity and this is spirituality. "I could not speak unto you as unto spiritual." So he heads this whole thing right up through gifts to love, which is spirituality. He says, I may have all these gifts, and yet may be an unspiritual person. The gifts may only be marks of my spiritual infancy. I am not saying that that is necessarily so. Paul said that he spoke with tongues more than they all. But spiritual gifts and spirituality do not necessarily go together - that is the point. Spiritual maturity did not go hand in hand with their gifts at Corinth. They thought that the gifts meant much more than they did mean, that they were the evidences of great spiritual measure. They did not see. Let us come back to it - there is a difference between spiritual gifts and spiritual persons. The gifts - what are they? The result of the Spirit coming upon a person. The spiritual person - what is he? He is spiritual as the result of the Spirit forming within. There is a lot of difference between inward formation and merely outward action.

Well then, in Corinth, spirituality meant a heavenly standard of wisdom and power; the Body as a unified whole; and spiritual measure inward more than spiritual gifts outward. That is spirituality. I ask you yourselves to go on with your New Testament looking for the marks of spirituality in these letters, and when you get them, you will be seeing the law by which the churches as they are can be changed into the Church as it is, that is, transformed into accord with the Divine thought. The transforming power is spirituality.

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