

The Church Is Essentially Supernatural

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Church is essentially supernatural in its origin, support, and nature, being born from above and sustained by heavenly resources.

Scripture: Matthew 16:18, John 3:3, John 6:35, Ephesians 1:19, Philippians 2:7

Topics: "Supernatural Church", "Spirituality in Christianity"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that the Church is fundamentally supernatural, originating from heaven and sustained by divine power. He explains that true Christianity, embodied in the Church, must be recognized as a spiritual entity that encounters opposition but ultimately prevails through supernatural support. The sermon outlines essential features of a true local church, including heavenly light, life, food, fellowship, and order, all of which reflect Christ's presence and purpose. Sparks warns against the dangers of relying on worldly methods, which can lead to a loss of spiritual power and impact. He calls for a return to the supernatural foundation of the Church to fulfill its divine mission.

Transcript

When our Lord made the great pronouncement about His Church: "...I will build my Church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it", He intimated three things. One, that He would build a definite entity called His Church. Two, that that Church would encounter an opposing force in its full and final enmity. Three, that that power would be taken at its ultimate strength and be destroyed, that is, made incapable of prevailing against that Church. In this full statement there is a very definite indication of the fundamental nature of His true Church. We have been saying earlier that the Church is essentially a spiritual thing, and that spirituality is its basic principle. But can we be still clearer as to what we mean by spirituality? Yes, I think that we can, and that by using an alternative word, the word 'supernatural'.

The Church is Essentially Supernatural

The Church is the embodiment of TRUE Christianity, and TRUE Christianity is supernatural, or it is nothing! It is only when and where that is fully realized and accepted that the Church really exists and can be the power that it is intended to be.

1. Supernatural in Origin

First of all, Christianity and the Church (in truth, identical terms) came down from heaven, and have still unceasingly to be received and ENTERED from there. This is the very foundational truth of Christ Himself and of the Church in every individual incorporated into it. The teaching of the New Testament everywhere is this. The origin and home of Christ was in heaven. John's Gospel and Paul's Letter to the Ephesians are a particular and emphatic argument for this one thing, and they comprehend the New Testament in this truth. In the former the repeated affirmation of Christ as to His heavenly origin is the basis of EVERYTHING in the whole Gospel. It is a "verily, verily" - 'most truly', and everything in the Gospel is intended to bear that out and be evidence of it.

But when that has been recognized, the Gospel, and the rest of the New Testament return from that to affirm equally that the Church embodies that truth and fact of Christ. John 3 will employ the identical language - "verily, verily" - in connection with any single individual entering the Church. That individual, no matter if he be the best specimen and representative of the Old Testament Israel (such as Nicodemus) just "CANNOT" enter along the horizontal line of this creation; he cannot enter by the door of nature, of tradition, of 'religion'; he "MUST be born from above". By THIS birth he is constituted a SUPER-natural being in the INNERMOST reality of his being: what Paul calls "a NEW creation".

Then correspondingly the Church is born from above on the Day of Pentecost. The difference between the same persons before and after that event, and the corporate nature of the new entity, are patent to all who have eyes to see. It is supernatural.

2. Supernatural in Support

What was - and IS - true of the origin and home of Christ and His Church is shown with OVERWHELMING evidence to be true of their sustenance and survival. 'Bread from heaven' only means the sustaining, supporting power of heavenly resources. This is seen in two connections. One, in the law of utter dependence upon God and heaven; the very principle of the Incarnation - "He emptied himself" (Philippians 2:7). Again, John's Gospel is a constant emphatic assertion of this. The double "verily, verily" is employed to affirm this - (5:19): "Verily, verily, I say unto you, the Son can do nothing of (out from) himself", etc., etc. For every work, for every word, for every time, He declared that He was dependent upon His Father, upon heaven. It explains His lowly birth, His lowly upbringing, His later homelessness. It explains His being "despised and rejected of men". But was there ever a life and work so powerful as His?

The other connection is that of the Church. When we consider the human material of the first nucleus, and MAINLY of its growth; when we take into account what it did NOT have of this world's goods and support; and when we think of all that was against it in every conceivable way, bent upon its annihilation; and then remark its more than survival as an entity, there is only one word for it - supernatural! I confess that I have marvelled at the sustained and triumphant faith of a man like the Apostle Paul when I see him suffering as he did, and when I read his own catalogues of sufferings. The natural mind would say: 'This is not the support of heaven', but we have the verdict of many centuries, and it is the evidence and verdict of the supernatural.

Surely all this is contained in that further double "verily" of John 6, where - with an allusion to Israel's life in the wilderness - Jesus declares Himself to be the Bread of God from heaven. Indeed, so strong, meaningful, and imperative is His mind on this matter that in that chapter He uses the double "verily" four times. The wilderness has always been the symbol or figure of a place outside of the world, and the succour and sustenance in conditions so inimical to life demand resources from another realm. The

history of the spiritual life is the history of secret supernatural support. Silently, without demonstration; sustained, without failing, sufficient, without poverty, the Manna fell, and the Heavenly Lord of Life has maintained His Church in the same way. Yes, while it has been silent and often almost imperceptible to the natural senses, yet in FACT, it has been a working of immense power. The New Testament will teach us that the very birth and sustenance of the Church is the counterpart of Israel's emancipation from Egypt. There and then the power of God extended and exhausted the WHOLE might of Egypt and its gods, and then nullified death itself.

The part of the New Testament which most specifically brings the Church into view uses such words as: "The EXCEEDING greatness of his power which is to usward who believe."

We have far from understood the terrific thing that was involved in the death and resurrection of Christ IN ORDER to secure the Church unto God!

Surely we have said enough already to do one or two very supremely important things.

Firstly, to show what the true Church is according to the New Testament revelation. If this is not a misapprehension of that revelation, it must be a very discriminating thing; that is, it must reveal a very great difference between the true Church, on one side, and that immense umbrella which goes by the name on the other side, an umbrella under which have gathered so many institutions and conflicting conceptions.

It should be a corrective of two extremes. The extreme of a too great an inclusiveness which overlooks the fundamental and essential nature of the supernatural, of which we have spoken: the supernatural in the new birth from heaven of every individual in the Church. Also a corrective of the opposite extreme of an unscriptural exclusiveness, which makes Christ smaller than He really is in excluding from fellowship truly born-again believers on the ground of some particular technique of 'protection', or some specific interpretation of truth.

Further, if what we have said is a true definition of the Church and its nature, then, surely, it explains loss of power, of impact, of supernatural influence, and it explains the confusion, the poverty of spiritual food for hungry sheep, and the scatteredness which is Satan's special strategy to rob the Church of its vocation to take the Kingdom and reign!

The explanation is that the great power of utter dependence upon God, which is the categorical demand of God for the showing of His own glory, has been surrendered to recourse to the world for means, methods, fashions, etc., to make God's work 'successful'. Satan is not one bit afraid of anything that will use his own kingdom for its glory! He will even sponsor anything that will give him a place. The curse resting upon him and this world will always spell frustration, confusion, and eventual vanity to all that is of his kingdom, hence so much of these very things in a Church which is - IN ANY RESPECT - of this world. The Church has so largely failed to discern why - in essential relation to His mission and ministry - the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness is given a place in three of the Gospels, and in that specific connection John's Gospel is so gathered up in chapter 17, where the emphasis of Jesus is upon His not being of this world, and the same of His Church!

The Church - universal and local - which is constituted on spiritual and heavenly principles will have food enough for its own needs, and to spare for all the world. The hungry will gravitate toward such. It will be a SPIRITUAL magnet which will draw the Lord's people together in a SPIRITUAL fellowship. It will therefore

be an object of Satan's special attention to undo it. But, even if he succeeds in destroying its TEMPORAL aspects, by martyrdom, fire, dissensions, scatterings, places, etc., such a church will have held SPIRITUAL values which are indestructible and eternal - "for the things which are seen are temporal (transient, passing) but the things which are not seen are eternal".

The ultimate test is the eternal!

We said at the commencement that, while we are concerned with the nature of the true Church universal, we have a special concern for the local expression. We shall therefore now concentrate our attention upon that expression.

If we take seriously the first three chapters of the book of the Revelation (and surely we must do so) we shall be impressed with the Lord's serious concern for such local expressions. A matchless presentation of Himself is given by way of judging the churches ACCORDING TO HIMSELF. Every feature of that presentation is a factor in judgment. Then the churches are given a twofold symbolic definition; one as of stars and the other as lampstands. Leaving many details until later, we, at the moment, note that the common feature is that of the power of testimony. It is the POSITIVE element of a challenge to world darkness. All through what follows in relation to the churches the feature and factor of positiveness of spiritual life and influence are dominant and paramount. All controversy by the Lord with the churches - on whatever specified account - is focused upon this ultimate issue: the positive effect of the church being where it is. Is there an impact within (lampstands) and without (stars)? Are they telling, accountable, effective, unmistakable? Have they an influential impact upon their surroundings? Is there spiritual power that has effects? Ultimately, the continuance of their place in the Divine economy - being retained or 'removed' - rests upon this issue. Many things are detailed as the cause of the loss of power, but it is that loss which makes for judgment.

Having noted the inclusive issue which determines everything in a local testimony we proceed to ask and answer the question: What are

The Essential Features of a True Local Church?

We are seeking to keep close and true to the overall principle that the Church - universal and local - is called to be an expression of Christ. It is impossible to read the New Testament without seeing that the presence of Christ anywhere was the presence of

1. Heavenly light and power

This we have just indicated as the basis of His judgment of churches. With Him it was not only the light of teaching or doctrine. It was teaching personified. There was the teaching incarnated in manhood. His teaching and His works were one. It was very practical light! It was light from another world. If the stars RULED the night they did so by the reflected light of the sun. If the churches are to have the POWER of truth it must be because they give a rebound of Christ upon human darkness. A local expression of Christ should mean that there is EFFECTIVE light, both for the Lord's people (the candlesticks) and for the world (the stars). The people who have contact with such a local church should feel the POWER of the teaching, should be affected by it, and it should be fruitful in them. This is not only a test, but it is a testimony to what the Lord has provided for. Is it a people LIVING in the good of the heavenly light received through that vessel? Is sin rebuked and exposed? Are sinners convicted? Do the perplexed get understanding in that presencing of Christ?

2. Heavenly life

The Lord said that His very coming into this world was "that they might have life". Therefore, His presence in a locality by means of the church there should mean that all who come and go register a HEAVENLY livingness. Not just excitableness, noise, activity, etc., but a life which is not of this world. There are not dead forms and customs. There is nothing in a rut. Life is mediated by all that has a place and a part. There is a spiritual LIFT as of RESURRECTION life! No depression!

3. Heavenly food

Yet again, as we have seen earlier, the presence of Christ meant bread for the hungry. The very "compassion" of Christ meant that He could not bear to have people come hungry and go away the same. A true local expression of Christ will mean that that company of His people will have, not only enough for themselves, but the margin, or overflow to all the hungry - spiritually hungry. That will be a house of bread where none ever fails to be fed. The food will not be just localized, but will be ministered to many beyond.

4. Heavenly fellowship

An impressive feature of Christ when personally present among men was the way He transcended the things which divide men in this world. He made no ATTEMPT to make everyone and everything uniform by organization, institution, denomination, class, category, forms, systems, etc. Every type and temperament, if free from prejudice and hypocrisy and of open heart and conscious of spiritual need, found a COMMON ground of fellowship and oneness in Him. He just rose above the dividing things, and in response to Him people found that things which had separated them just vanished. Christ became their common ground.

Thus should it be in any local corporate expression of Christ. Questions of association, denomination, sect, tradition, etc., should not arise, but just vanish in the presence of the warmth of fellowship and ENTIRE occupation with Christ. The only effective way of true unity, heavenly fellowship, is that of the higher than earthly ground - the love of heaven.

5. Heavenly order

All the four things which we have mentioned as characteristic of a true local expression of the Church and of Christ will be helped or hindered by the presence or absence of a heavenly, spiritual order. All appointments, positions, "offices", should be by the definite witness of the Holy Spirit; not by man's choosing, whether by others or by the person's ambition. As the result of much prayer by the church it should be manifest where anointing and gift rests, so that the function of those in any position of leadership should definitely mean that the church is inspired, strengthened and built up. Failing this HEAVENLY order, there will exist an element of artificiality, a straining to MAKE something and keep it going. The highest level of genius will fall far short of the smallest measure of Divine inspiration. It is this Divine inspiration that determines all Divine service and functions. There is no EFFORT or strain where the anointing rests, but spontaneity and liberty and unction. Oil has ever been a symbol of the Holy Spirit, and where He is things should move as in oil.

This is not at all an impossible standard, but the normal expression of the Lordship and Headship of Christ.

What God requires He makes possible.

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