

The Church: Its Birth, Vocation and Completion

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Church is the 'fulness' of Christ, a particular body of people chosen in Christ before the world was, and its purpose is to show forth the excellencies of God.

Topics: "Divine Purpose", "The Church"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the profound significance of the Church in God's plan, presenting it as the body of Christ, chosen and called out to fulfill a divine purpose. He explains that the Church is not merely an assembly of individuals but a collective entity that embodies Christ's fullness and serves as a vessel for His expression. The sermon explores various biblical representations of the Church, including its role as the House of God, a holy nation, and the Bride of Christ, highlighting its eternal value and the divine order established within it. Sparks underscores the Church's calling to reflect God's excellencies and to be a living testimony of Christ's character in the world. Ultimately, he assures that despite present challenges, the Church will be presented to Christ in its glorious completion.

Transcript

Why the Church?

The greatest concern or interest of God is His Son. The second greatest interest or object with God in this universe is the Church. And in the Scriptures those two are put together. Here is the statement:

"He... gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fulness of Him That filleth all in all" (Eph. 1:23).

The Church is the 'fulness' of Christ. If the Church needs Christ, Christ needs the Church.

What Is The Church?

We will seek to answer the question: 'What is the Church?', in a few concise sentences.

Firstly, the Church is a particular body of people, chosen in Christ before the world was. That is precisely stated in Ephesians 1:4. There, it is stated that the Church, this particular body of people, was 'chosen in Him'. Just as definitely as Christ was chosen (Luke 9:35; cf. Ps. 89:19; Is. 42:1) and appointed (Heb. 1:2,

3:2), so was the Church.

Secondly, the Church is a body of people called out of the nations to be a heavenly people now: not hereafter in ages to come, but now. That is clearly implied in Acts 15:14: "God did visit... to take out... a people for His name"; and it is that to which our Lord referred, when He said: "I will build My church" (Matt. 16:18).

Thirdly, the Church is a body of people who, although called individually, are not just so many individuals. They were never chosen individually, never chosen separately, but as a whole. It is very important to remember that. And as the work of the Holy Spirit is always to make real that which has been eternally determined and appointed by God, so it is His work--not as an afterthought, but according to plan--to make real and operative this eternal oneness in and with Christ: for that is the purpose of God.

Magnificence Of The Divine Conception

At this point I want to quote a passage from a book published several years ago which puts the matter in a very much better way than I can, and I reproduce it because it is not mine.

'It is essential to the right consideration of this subject (that is, the Church) that the magnificence of the New Testament concept of the Church be apprehended. In the Epistles to the Ephesians and to the Colossians the view of the Church which is Christ's Body is set forth. It is there seen as the ideal, invisible, indivisible, inviolable company of the redeemed of the present age. None but the truly regenerate have part therein; none, save the elect, partake of its blessedness. Failure and defection are unknown to it. Into it the pretender and the hypocrite cannot come. Breach or division it cannot know. Its unity is unbreakable; its calling and glory, heavenly; its relationship to Christ holy and intimate; and its destiny bound up in Him in splendour inconceivable. Through the centuries of our era, each marching generation but brings a contribution to it. While historically its members are being called, one by one, and incorporated into it, in its completeness and glory it is ever before the eye of God. Indeed, it has been in His heart from before all times. From their heavenly vantage points the angelic orders observe it, and are impressed and enlightened concerning the manifold wisdom of its Divine architect. Through the swift ebbing years of this age Christ Himself is its builder, adding stone to stone to this temple exceeding magnificent, Himself the while abiding that day when at last, complete, sanctified, beautiful, spotless and radiant with heavenly glory, it shall be presented to Himself and taken into the full enjoyment of an eternal association of blessedness, the features of which are at present undisclosed.'

I am sure you agree that, on the one side, that is no exaggeration, and that, on the other side, it is a presentation of something that is of tremendous account to God, to Christ, and to ourselves.

Should you find difficulty with some of the assertions, you must remember that the whole statement is made from God's and from Heaven's standpoint, not from ours. That is how He sees it, eternally. What He may be seeing as to the present condition of things down here may be another matter; but that is God's eternal conception, and that is how God will eternally have it. It will be like that. And, eventually, it will prove to have been like that. It may be difficult for us to see; nevertheless, if we could see from God's standpoint, we should see that every sentence of that statement is true.

Evidence From The Opposition

Let us suspend our difficulties for a little while and go on. The Church is a definite object, or entity. It is not just an abstract idea--it is not an imaginary thing. It is a reality--not only in the mind of God, but, when it is seen according to its true constitution, and not man's constitution, a reality in its actual existence also. The Church is of immense value and importance to God and to Christ. As we have read, it is declared to be His "fulness". All the greater values of Christ--His fulness--are for the Church, in the Church, and through the Church. We have the statement of God's Word about it, and we have the history of the Church--in its continuance, its persistence, its very survival--to bear it out. And if we need more evidence as to its importance and its value, we can always get it from a certain quarter, which evinces a very irreligious solicitude for God's interests. Satan hates the Church, as he hates Christ. He has given more trouble over the Church than over anything else.

I want to give one more quotation from the book, and I am very glad that I am not saying this at first-hand.

'All through the Christian age a minority of believers has endeavoured to carry out in corporate life these scriptural principles. The bitterest and most implacable opposition has come to them, not from the world, but from organized Christendom, that is, the system that men call the Church. By this powerful organization they have been in turn oppressed, misrepresented, persecuted, reviled, ridiculed, and ignored. But their persistence from century to century has supplied the proof of the practicability of these principles and of such a Church being in the will of God.'

And a short extract from another book--this is about the Church:

'Against such a transcendent truth, affecting as it does the glory of God and the person of Christ, it is not a matter of surprise that the arch-adversary should set himself with his utmost might and his most persistent and ingenious devices, both by opposition and by imitation....'

Yes: if there is one thing, next to the Lord Jesus Himself, that Satan hates, it is the Church, and any true representation of it. I should like to spend some time on the matter of the representation of the Church--the necessity of it, the possibility of it, the nature of it--and we may come back to a closing word on that later.

Titles Or Pictures Of The Church

We are asking: Why the Church? I think the best way of answering that question is by a consideration of the various representations or pictures of it, the various titles given to it, in the Word of God. There are in the Word perhaps nine main titles or illustrations of the Church. There may be other subsidiary ones, but in the main there are nine. If we consider carefully these pictures or titles, we shall get very near to an answer to our question. Let us run through them with a few comments upon each.

(1) The House Of God

The first title given to the Church is the House of God. But here it is necessary for us to be clear as to our terms. When we speak of a house, we immediately think of a structure, a building. We pass along the street and we say, 'That is a nice house', or 'an ugly house', or 'an unusual house'; that is how we use the word. It is necessary for us to understand that that is not the full meaning of the word as it is used in the connection 'the House of God'. We should be nearer the truth if we changed the word into 'household', because that is really the thought, it is inclusive of three ideas. One, the structure--God's building; two, the contents of the house --what is in it; three, the arrangement or order of the house--how the contents are set out, deployed; their place, their position, and so on. With this, of course, is closely associated the idea

of government. The structure, contents, arrangement, order and government of the house: that is all contained in this expression, 'the House of God.'

First of all, the House of God is God's building, God's structure. "I will build My church". It is God's. Man does not make this, and it is impertinence to take hold of it and make it man's. The proprietorship of this building is vested solely in God Himself.

Then, what is in this House is there because God has put it there, nothing can have a place, as a 'living stone', in the House of God, except as put there by God. You cannot 'join' the House of God at your own choice. You may talk about 'joining the Church', but that belongs to another realm of things altogether. In the New Testament 'the Lord added to the Church them that were being saved' (Acts 2:47). The Lord added. Only those whom the Lord includes are in the House of God.

Thirdly, the order in the House of God is God's order. God is a God of order; Satan is the god of anarchy and lawlessness. God has an order for His House, and He is very particular about it. That is clear enough from the First Letter to the Corinthians. If we ignore that order, overlook it, set it aside, it will be to our own loss, our own detriment. We shall find that in our lives there will be frustration, limitation; God will not be setting His seal upon us. The Holy Spirit is the custodian of the Divine order, and so we shall come into that order if we are under the government of the Holy Spirit.

Our placing in the House of God is the prerogative of God by the Holy Spirit. The place that we occupy, the function that we perform, must be God-appointed. If we try to do what God has never called us to do, we shall be misfits in the House of God. But if, under the Holy Spirit's government, we are content with that for which the Lord has brought us into His House, we shall be at rest; it will be ease and not friction. God superintends His own House: it is His government, because it is His House. And, as I said in the other connection, it is nothing other than impertinence to come into God's House and try to upset the order, or to impose our own order. We must ever seek to be subject to the Holy Spirit, and His order, in the House of God.

(2) The Tabernacle And Temple

The second representation of the House is found in the Tabernacle and the Temple. They are identical in purpose. There are in the main two ideas connected with these designations.

Firstly, they are the place where God is, the place where God chooses to be. There is a place where God chooses to be and where He can be found, and, normally, that is in His Tabernacle, in His Temple--in the Church. The Church is supposed to be, intended to be, the place where you will find God, where God is. That is not a building; that is the people of God. He chooses a place for Himself. How much there is in the Old Testament illustrative of this (cf. Ps. 132:13-14). But His own Son's words are: "Where two or three are gathered together into My name, there am I" (Matt. 18:20), it is but the enunciation of an eternal principle. God chooses to locate or localize Himself: He chooses to be in a certain place, and there you find Him. How one is tempted to enlarge upon that! But if you, as a believer, as a Christian, detach yourself from the Lord's people, and go off on your own independent way, you will find yourself, before long, like Thomas--where the Lord is not. And, like Thomas, you will not find the Lord until you come back with the other disciples. God has chosen His Temple, His spiritual Temple, as the place where He will meet us, the place where He can be found.

And, when it is as it should be, when it is according to His mind, it is also the place where He speaks. I venture to go a step further, and say that the more closely the conditions in a company correspond to God's idea, God's thought for the Church, the more fully will you hear Him speak there. You will hear more from the Lord under such conditions than where there is a less close approximation to His conception of the Temple.

The second thought connected with the Tabernacle or Temple is that it is the place where God is worshipped. It is "holiness unto the Lord". God's spiritual House, however, is now no longer a structure, but a people, and so the Temple conveys the thought of a worshipping people. And what is worship? We have often defined worship as the drawing of everything Godward; everything directed toward the Lord. That is "holiness--or 'wholeness'--unto the Lord", everything being for Him. That is how the Church should be; that is God's mind.

(3) A Holy Nation

From Peter, we learn that the Church is a nation--"a holy nation" (1 Pet. 2:9, quoting from Ex. 19:6). Much light is thrown upon this in the Old Testament, as we know. As we said at the beginning, it is a people taken out of the nations for His Name, to be made, here and now, a heavenly nation, a nation of a different order--the very word 'heavenly', of course, carries that with it--a heavenly nation out from the nations and yet in the midst of the nations. But there are three things to be noted in connection with this conception of the Church as a nation.

The first thing is the principle or law of separation. That is clearly illustrated and in force in the case of Israel, as the earthly type of this Church, separate from the nations. Israel lost its very integration, its vocation, its power, its glory--everything--when it lost that distinctiveness from the other nations, when it allowed a bridge to be built between it and them, and began worshipping their gods. It was because of its lost distinctiveness as a nation that Israel went into captivity. The Old Testament is a very powerful object-lesson of spiritual principles. If that is true in the temporal and earthly realm, how much more true must it be in the spiritual and the heavenly and the eternal! One thing that has accounted, perhaps more than anything else, for loss of glory, power, influence, and the presence of God, in the Church during the centuries, has been the infiltration of the world into it, and it getting into the world--a lost distinctiveness, a lost separation.

Moreover, the nation was a constituted as well as a separated people. It certainly was separated--there was no doubt about its separation from Egypt! Pharaoh tried to parley on that matter; suggested that they should leave a little behind, a little attachment. 'No', said the Lord through Moses, 'not a single hoof of a single animal!' (Ex. 10:24-26). And then look at the breach that God made, the gap that He put between Israel and Egypt. It is all very illustrative. But then, when He got them out, He constituted them a nation. They came out a multitude--we might almost say a rabble; and then God took them in hand to form and constitute them into an entity, with spiritual laws and principles governing every detail of their lives. They were brought right under the direct control of Heaven, where nothing of this world could meet their need. Their resources were all from above; they were a people constituted on heavenly principles, under heavenly government. And that is the Church!

Thirdly, Peter tells us, in this comprehensive statement, that the purpose of our calling is 'to show forth the excellencies of Him Who called us'--of the One Who 'called us out of darkness into His marvellous light'. The vocation of the nation is to show forth His 'excellencies': in other words, to show how God excels, how

He transcends. That was Israel's calling; and if that was true in a limited, earthly way, how much more true it is, in a heavenly, universal way, of the Church. To show forth His excellencies, how He excels: that is what He is seeking to do all the time. As we have often said, He allows the enemy to go a long way, to have a good deal of tether and leash, and then He shows just how much further He can go. He allows the enemy to do much, and then He shows how He can take hold of the much and turn it to His own glory.

The 'excellencies of Him', shown in the Church and by the Church: this is something to dwell upon. Look at the Book of the Acts from that standpoint alone, and see the working out of what Paul said, many years afterwards: "I would have you know, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the progress of the gospel" (Phil. 1:12). Just think of the things which befell him--all falling out for the furtherance of the Gospel! That is one way in which His excellencies are shown forth. If angels are looking on, I am sure they are covering their faces and covering their feet in worship, as they see the grace of God in many a suffering servant and child of His--the excellencies of His grace.

(4) The Church

For our fourth designation, we come to the very word 'Church' itself. This, as we know, represents the Greek word *ekklesia*, a very rich and full word that was appropriated by Christ and the apostles and applied to this eternally elect body, the Church. The modern equivalent of this word is our word 'assembly', a word which carries in it all the elements of the meaning of the original Greek. In the Greek world, certain people were chosen, elected, to a position either upon the municipal council, or the provincial or national government, according as it was in a city, or in a province, or in a country, respectively. And at a given time, when there was business of state to be attended to, and a session was to be convened, the messengers went out to call the men together, to summon the assembly together in order to transact the business of the state or city. Such a body of men was called the *ekklesia*.

It was not a Church matter, an 'ecclesiastical' matter, as we think of it; it was a purely political matter, whether of municipality, province, or state--the 'Assembly'. It embodied the idea of an elected company, brought together to transact the business of the kingdom. This is the word that was taken over and applied to the Church. How rich it is! An elect company, called together for the purpose of carrying on the work of the Kingdom! An elect company--'chosen in Him before the foundation of the world' (Eph. 1:4), 'called into the fellowship of His Son' (1 Cor. 1:9), called 'according to His eternal purpose' (Eph. 3:11): called together, and, with Him, entrusted with the affairs of His government. Would that we, as the Church, approximated to that more closely, more fully!

(5) The Body Of Christ

Next we come to 'the Church which is His Body'. We read about it in Ephesians 1:22-23, and there are, of course, a number of other references to the Church under that designation or title. What is the idea, or the function, of a physical body? First of all, the body of a man is a vehicle for the expression of his personality. Not always can you read the personality through the features and the body, but people usually give themselves away to some degree by their bodies. Even if, as in some cases, you find it difficult to read what is going on inside, the very fact that it is difficult to read tells you that they are not intending you to know--and you have read them! We cannot easily get away from the fact that, whether by gesture, by look, by expression, or in many other ways, we betray ourselves through our bodies. That, at any rate, is one purpose of a body, to be the expression of the man inside, to provide him with a means of expressing himself.

In the same way, 'the Church which is His Body' is the vessel, the 'embodiment', of the Lord the Spirit, in which and by which He is to express Himself. If the Church, as we met it and moved amongst its members, accorded with the Divine idea, we should know what the Lord was like. Let us take this to heart: that our very existence as the Church is in order that people may know what Christ is like. Alas, we fail Him so much in this. It is often so difficult to detect the real character of the Lord Jesus in His people. But that is the very first meaning of the Body of Christ.

But further--and here we are on familiar ground--a physical body is an organic whole. It is not something put together from the outside. It is something that is marked by a oneness, by reason of a life within; it is related and inter-related in every part, dependent and inter-dependent; every remotest part is affected by what happens in any other part. That could be much enlarged upon. But we have much more yet to learn as to the actual spiritual application of this reality about the Church as the Body of Christ. We need to be brought right into that great 'sympathetic system' of the Body. And that demands a real work of grace in us. There are many ways in which that is expressed in the Word. We are to "remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; them that are ill-treated, as being yourselves also in the body" (Heb. 13:3); that is, we are to get into their situations by the Spirit. It is an organic whole. 'If one member suffers, all the members suffer with it' (1 Cor. 12:26). It is probable that we suffer a good deal for things that we know nothing about. There is suffering going on, and we are involved in it: the Lord is seeking to involve us in the needs of others, to bring us into their conflict.

But, whether or not we apprehend this truth, whether or not we are alive to it and understand it, it is God's fact that it is so. Believers in one place are dependent upon believers in another place; they are affected. This is such a whole; there is one sympathetic nerve-system running through the whole body. If only you and I really became spiritually more alive, the expression of the Body would be much more perfect. Our deadness, our insensitiveness, our lack of real spiritual aliveness, results in there being more suffering, more loss, than there need be.

If only we could--not mechanically, and not by information, but on the principle of the Body--be moved into a universal sympathy and co-operation with the people of God! Our moving is so often mechanical; we have to read or hear letters, somehow receive information, in order to be stimulated to some measure of prayer. But I believe that, altogether apart from those means, if we were really in the Spirit, the Spirit would lay burdens for people on our hearts. Do you not think that it is a matter that we ought continually to bring before the Lord? 'Lord, there is someone praying today for something: is it possible that I might be the answer to their prayer? If so, show me, lead me, lay it on me.' That is spiritual relatedness, aliveness. The oneness of the Body is a great vocation.

(6) A Royal Priesthood

The sixth designation is found in Peter again: "a royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:9). He is again quoting from Exodus 19:6--"a kingdom of priests". Notice the combination of the two ideas--king and priest, kingdom and priesthood: two functions brought together--the throne and the altar. What does it mean? Surely it means this: that it is by yielding, releasing, letting go, by self-emptying and suffering, that the Throne operates, that Divine power is exercised in this universe. It is suffering and glory, it is weakness and power--seeming contradictions in terms. But here it is in the Word: "in the midst of the throne... a Lamb" (Rev. 5:6). Here is the symbol of utmost yieldedness, and, in the right sense, of non-resistance, even to evil (I am not speaking of non-resistance, to sin, but to wrong suffered, injustice, unrighteousness): a Lamb led to the slaughter, and through the slaughter to the Throne (Is. 53:7; 52:13).

These are tremendous spiritual principles. "Take My yoke upon you, and learn of Me; for I am meek and lowly in heart" (Matt. 11:29). This is the King speaking: it is He into Whose hands has been committed 'all authority in Heaven and in earth' (Matt. 28:18). See how He received the authority, how He reached the Throne! The Church is supposed to be like that: a kingly priesthood, on the one side involved in sacrifice and suffering, like the priest, and at the same time ruling and reigning on the Throne, as a king.

(7) One New Man

The seventh picture is "one new man" (Eph. 2:14-16; Gal. 3:28). Jesus called Himself, and it was His favourite title, "the Son of Man". Of course, the 'oneness' referred to by Paul is the result of different kinds of people having disappeared. There is no longer Jew and Gentile: as different kinds, as representatives of two racial orders of men, they have disappeared, they have gone out. They have vanished, and in their place there is "one new man". Taking up all that we said in the beginning about the meaning of the Incarnation, we must say that the Church is a different kind of entity, representing a different kind of manhood, of race, of mankind; of a different order, just as Christ was different.

With Him the difference was inward. Looking on Him from the outside, people did not discern the great difference. There may have been some features that were different from other men, but if so, they were not impressed by them. They could not see the difference between Him and other men. "Is not this the carpenter?" (Mark 6:3). They talked about Him as they would of other men, looking on Him from the outside. But He was different as a Man. The Man inside the body was a different Man, governed by different laws, different conceptions altogether, from those by which other people were governed; governed from a different realm, and so--in that sense--always a mystery.

Many years afterward, John said, in writing his letter: "For this cause the world knoweth us not, because it knew Him not" (1 John 3:1b). We, too, are another kind of being; and that ought to be, if I may put it this way, quite natural. The real secret, the real meaning is inward, is it not? Outwardly perhaps no different from other people--although there ought to be some traces outwardly; not self-conscious, not always trying to be another kind, no pose: just the fact--of which we ourselves are the most unconscious--that there is something there that does not belong to this creation; something that speaks of another world, another order, another life, another nature. We just do not behave, under given circumstances, as others would behave. And the Church, composed of many individuals, is supposed to be like that--a "one new man".

(8) The Bride

The eighth title is that of 'the Bride, the Lamb's wife'. Here we must refer to quite a number of Scriptures, from Genesis, from Matthew and Mark, from Ephesians, from the Revelation. Almost the last word of the angel to the Apostle John was: "Come hither, I will show thee the bride, the wife of the Lamb" (Rev. 21:9b): almost synonymous terms, and yet not quite identical in sense. Let us first of all recall something of the beginning of that relationship. The first word concerning it came from God Himself: "It is not good that the man should be alone" (Gen. 2:18). The idea of this relationship, then, at the very beginning, was one of fellowship and companionship: the sublime idea of the relationship between Christ and His Church. "Christ... loved the Church, and gave Himself up for it" (Eph. 5:25; A.S.V.). God, so to speak, looked upon His Son, and said: 'It is not good for Him to be alone.' The Church--mystery of mysteries!--is supposed to be in that relationship to Christ: to be His companion, to have fellowship with Him, to have interchange of mind, of heart, to move together.

And then God said: "I will make him a help meet for him" (Gen. 2:18). 'I will make him someone meet to help him, suitable to help him--a help-meet'. A very simple idea; but transfer that to the Church. To minister to Christ, to take account of Christ's needs, Christ's desires, to have the whole poise in His direction. 'How can I anticipate Him, His desires and His needs? how can I best serve His interests?' That, of course, is the Bible idea of a wife, but the Bible at least intends the earthly relationship to be a reflection of the heavenly--'even as Christ and the Church' (Eph. 5:25,29,32). The point is this: that you and I, if we are of the Church, are to have our poise entirely toward Him. How can we best serve Him, how can we be well-pleasing to Him? How can we anticipate Him in His needs and desires, and what will be to His interests? That is the very first idea bound up with the Bride, the Lamb's wife.

With that, of course, goes the idea of identity: "the twain shall become one flesh" (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:5; 1 Cor. 6:16). They are one: not two now, but one--one flesh. Remember Ephesians 5 on that matter. Furthermore, the idea of the relationship is His increase. "Be fruitful and multiply..." (Gen. 1:28). "He shall see His seed... He shall see of the travail of His soul..." (Is. 53:10-11). How? There is no other way but by the Church. Let us note this: the travail of His soul is to be satisfied by the Church's bringing into being of new babes. It puts evangelism in a new light, does it not? It is for Him. It is not just the interest of getting souls saved: it is that He may see of the travail of His soul, that He may be satisfied. The Church is the vessel in which and through which Christ is reproduced--through which, can we say, He is propagated. And any 'church', so calling itself, that is not reproductive, to which the Lord is not adding, in which no spiritual births are taking place, has missed the point of its relationship to Christ.

(9) The City

The last picture is that of the City. At the end of the Revelation, we are told that the angel, after having said: "Come hither, I will show thee the bride, the wife of the Lamb" (21:9), carried the Apostle away "in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the holy city..." (v. 10). These are not two separate entities. All these titles belong to the one entity, but they are the same entity viewed from different standpoints. If you study it, I think you will find that the title of 'the City' gathers into itself all the elements of the others; they all come together in this.

Note some of the features of this City. First of all, its greatness. What a great City it is! It sets forth the spiritual greatness of the Church in union with Christ. Look again at its strength--its "walls great and high" (v.12): what strength there is in this City! It is the spiritual strength of the Church in union with Christ. It has proved true that "the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matt. 16:18). Hell has been moved from its depths, it has exhausted every resource against the Church; but the Church goes on--it is a mighty Church. Its strength is not the strength of men. Look again at its purity: "her light... as it were a jasper stone, clear as crystal" (v. 11): everything transparent--its street transparent gold (v. 18), its river of crystal clear water (22:1)--the purity of the Church at last. Look again at its beauty: "all manner of precious stones" (v. 19). It is a beautiful city. Its gates of pearl (v. 21) speak of the sufferings and the sacrifice of fellowship with its Lord and in His afflictions. Look at its livingness (21:1-2), and look at its luminousness (21:11, 23-24; 22:5)--its life and its light. Look at its fulness of resource: the trees bearing their fruit all the year round (22:2). Constant reproduction without intermission--something altogether phenomenal and different. And, finally, everywhere the number twelve written large: twelve foundations, twelve gates, twelve angels, twelve thousand stadia: all speaking of spiritual government.

Such is the presentation that we are given of the Church as it is to be when, at last, the work is done. Let us take note that it is presented to us as a fact. We might very well despair, now, that it could ever be

realized, but we have been given this prophetic revelation of just what it will be like at the end. No matter how things are now it does matter, of course, how they are--but in a sense, no matter how things are, that is how it is going to be. To go back to the former simile: He will "present the church to Himself a glorious Church" --a holy Church, a pure Church, a sanctified Church "not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing" (Eph. 5:27; A.S.V).

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