

The Church - Its Nature, Principles and Vocation

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Church is a spiritual entity that embodies the mystery of Christ, and its vocation is to see and apprehend Christ, and to be a microcosm of the Church universal.

Scripture: John 1:13, John 3:6-7, John 4:20-24, Acts 7:38, Romans 11:25, Galatians 1:16, Ephesians 1:17-18, Ephesians 3:10, Ephesians 6:12, Hebrews 8:5

Topics: "Nature of the Church", "Spirituality vs. Mysticism"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the Church as a significant battleground in history, highlighting the various perspectives on its nature and local expressions. He discusses the challenges faced by the Church, including the belief in its ruin and the need for a return to New Testament principles. Sparks argues that true local expressions of the Church are possible through a spiritual revelation of Christ, which is essential for understanding its true nature. He contrasts spirituality with mysticism, asserting that genuine spirituality arises from a new birth by the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, he calls for a deeper understanding of the Church as the embodiment of the mystery of Christ, which is revealed to believers through divine illumination.

Transcript

Next to the Person of Jesus Christ the Church has been, and continues to be, the great battleground of history. So much so is this the case that an ever-increasing number of books, journals, periodicals, 'Councils', 'Convocations', discourses, etc., are occupied with this matter as a primary concern. But most of all this is CONTROVERSIAL, thus justifying the phrase 'the battleground'. This is all very significant, indicating that it is a primary matter, and that it is something which does hold a position in the forefront of accountability. Rightly it does, and perhaps much more so than ALL this writing and talking understands. It is a primary concern in the whole cosmic realm, the super-mundane sphere, if we are to take both the practical evidence and the definite New Testament statements seriously. For instance, the whole letter to the Ephesians, and particularly 3:10 and 6:12.

It may seem to be arrogant and ambitious for us, who, being of such little account in ourselves, and by the medium of such an insignificant a means as this little paper, to think that we can handle this immense matter to any advantage. Having had this as a primary concern for so many years, and having seen the Church and the churches in so very many places from Far East to Far West, with much prayer exercise over it, perhaps we may be given something to say which throws some light into the shadows or darkness

of the immense confusion which exists in relation to the Church. We are especially concerned with the matter of local-assembly expressions of the Church, for only there can the real meaning of the Church be brought to immediacy.

We have to begin by asking the question which includes everything else, and which really expresses the problem in many minds:

CAN WE NOW ACCEPT THE POSSIBILITY OF TRUE LOCAL EXPRESSIONS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH?

This question - and there is not a little, but very much, to give rise to it - has, because of its acuteness, received many answers, or has been attacked in many ways. Some of these are as follows:

1. A large section of Christians have answered definitely 'NO', and they base this upon what they term 'the total ruin' position. They say that the Church is in unredeemable ruins, and therefore a corporate expression is no longer possible. Of course, they especially relate this to the Church universal, but they bring it very close by arguing that at the end-time everything will be individual. The basis of this is that in Revelation 2-3, where the Lord directs His address "to HIM that overcometh". Well, that is argument No. 1.
2. Then there are those whose answer is that the only possibility now is an approximate expression of the Church. That is, there can be no full and complete expression, but something comparative, provisional, and partial. There can be SOME features, and we must build upon SOME things which we perceive to be in the New Testament. In large instances the major denominations represent this position. Presbyterians base their whole position upon one interpretation of New Testament Church order, as they conceive it. The same is true of Lutherans, Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, 'Brethren', etc. For each and all of these the term 'Church' is employed. But it is a concept which is a convenient solution to the problem namely, a partial approximation.
3. Then, there is the answer which is expressed by what is called 'Sublimation'. That is, that the Church is a sublime conception and idea. It is idealistic, and we must live in the abstract realm of a sublime conception and not try to bring that 'down to earth', be too practical and demanding in reality. This answer and interpretation is expressed in the term 'The Church Mystical': but not practical.
4. There are those who have written off the whole idea of Church, either as impossible or unnecessary. They are definitely Christian Institutions and organizations, but not a Church or churches. To this category belong the Quakers, the Salvation Army, and a vast number of mission halls, and 'Missions'.
5. Finally for our purpose, there are those whose answer is a very positive one! Yes, we must return to the New Testament pattern 'and have New Testament churches!' They believe that the New Testament contains a definite 'blue print' for local churches, and they are committed to 'FORMING' such wherever possible. Unfortunately, they vary very much as to teachings, emphases, and practices, and some of them are characterized by excesses, abnormalities and exclusiveness.

Well, what are we going to say to all this?

As we see it, all are MORE OR LESS wrong or right (we underline 'more or less', but we would say that some are totally wrong), because the TRUE nature of the Church has been either lost or lost sight of.

The History of Israel

The history of Israel has a lot of light to throw upon this matter of the Church. Historic Israel was constituted upon the same eternal PRINCIPLES as the Christian Church. Indeed, they were called "the church in the wilderness" (Acts 7:38), and they were termed God's elect. They were intended to represent in time on the earth an ETERNAL and HEAVENLY concept. In types and symbols to figuratively and temporally embody spiritual principles and Divine thoughts. For our purpose here we have to narrow this all down to the main principles involved in their history. We divide that history into two phases. The one before, and leading to, the captivity in Babylon the seventy years. The reason for that captivity was purely and definitely idolatry. The captivity dealt with that, and after that there was no more idolatry OF THE SAME KIND in Israel. But then came - and still exists - the second, and both worse and longer, phase of judgment. This is revealed in the second aspect of the ministry of the Prophets. It is obvious that the Prophets prophesied in relation to the immediate future of the Babylonish and Assyrian captivity, and also in relation to a time further on. This second aspect is often taken up in the New Testament and applied - or shown to apply - to those times and events, with the extra feature that post-New Testament times (unto our day) were visualized. But why this second and longer and more terrible relegation to judgment? Why Israel's confusion, weakness, and loss of the IMMEDIATE presence and power of God, and only His sovereignty BEHIND their history? The answer is in one phrase - "spiritual blindness". "Blindness has happened to Israel" (Romans 11:25). There is a great deal about this in the Gospels, and both the teaching and miracles of Jesus were directed to and against this blindness. The giving sight to the blind was a testimony TO ISRAEL, as well as to the world. This blindness, however, was particularly related to the Person, the significance, and the purpose of Christ. That intervention in history was a mission to redeem, recover, and reestablish that ETERNAL concept in the heart of God, which was as 'the mystery' in Israel: that is, the SPIRITUAL principles and meanings HIDDEN in their temporal election and constitution, and to embody it all in a Person who was to be reproduced by the Church, as the Corn of Wheat, through death, being reproduced in resurrection in a corporate body.

There we have touched the very heart of the true nature of the Church. The touchstone of the Church is a SEEING by Divine - supernatural - Holy Spirit revelation and illumination the real significance and meaning of Jesus Christ and His mission. It is so evident that the great Apostle of 'the Mystery' - the Church, came to his knowledge and understanding of the true Church by way of the revelation of Christ to, and in, him (Galatians 1:16).

To truly see Christ is to see the Church, and only so can there be a true church. It was when the Lord was able to say of Peter that 'flesh and blood had not revealed the truth of His (Christ's) Person' that Christ immediately made the first definite announcement about the Church: "Upon this rock will I build my church." This all means, that fundamentally, a true expression of the Church, locally, is not more, nor less, nor other, than the spiritual apprehension of Christ by believers. The Church, local or universal, is not traditional. That would make it second-hand and therefore artificial. The Church cannot be seen through other people's eyes, whether those others be of the past (Apostles, etc.) or present (teachers).

We have known people to live in the presence of the teaching for years, and rejoice in it, repeat it, eventually to prove that they had not really seen with their own spiritual eyes by contradicting and discarding it all too easily. They had seen it mentally through the eyes of someone else - the teacher or preacher. When Paul SAW, it effected something in him that became himself, and no amount or form of suffering and outward disappointment could make him depart from the "heavenly vision". We repeat, that all of his rich and full understanding of the Church did not come, in the first place, from a revelation of some thing called 'the Church', but from a seeing of Christ as in the eternal councils of God. As the very

foundation this answers the five points which we earlier mentioned, and answers them comprehensively. Can there be local expression of the Church? Yes, given that such a seeing and apprehension of Christ is present, and we must dismiss the Holy Spirit and His work if we say that such a seeing is not possible now (Ephesians 1:17-18).

But having made the statement, it is necessary to say more as to the essential PRINCIPLES of a local church as a microcosm of the Church universal.

The first (included in what we have said above) and the most difficult to explain, although not to experience, is in that misunderstood, disliked, and frowned-upon word - spirituality. It should not be difficult to understand, because any and every true born-again believer knows that there is something about him or her that is not just natural. A change in mentality, disposition, concept, gravitation has taken place in them. They are just different since the new birth took place. (We are talking nonsense about the Church if this fundamental change has not been effected.) But we still have to define spirituality.

As a word and an idea, spirituality is not peculiar to the Bible and to Christians. The world uses it. For instance, in visiting a picture gallery, some pictures are looked at and the viewer passes on. But another picture holds the attention, for there is something more than canvas, paint, and an object depicted. That picture has an "atmosphere" about it: it touches the emotions; it stirs a sense of wonder; it is not just something in itself. There is something more about it than itself. The remark about that something is that there is something 'spiritual' about it. The same thing can be said about a song; the execution of a piece of music; an ornate and beautiful building; a form of service; and so on. This is what the world calls the spiritual. But what they really mean is mysticism. This can be particularly found in literature, and there is a category of writers known as 'the Mystics'. Religion is a special realm of mysticism. Let us say at once, and with emphasis, that mysticism and true spirituality, according to the Bible, are two entirely different things. They belong to two different realms. The one is temperamental, or a matter of temperament. It has its degrees. The simple response to beauty and emotion: or in more intense forms it can be psychic, fanatical. It can be induced by pathetic or tragic appeals. It can be worked up to excitability and paroxysms by repetitions - as of choruses and incantations. Thus, either mildly or extravagantly, AN EXTRA ELEMENT can appear or give character. Religion lends itself peculiarly to the mystical in these various forms and degrees.

But the spirituality of the Bible of which we are speaking is different. It is the result of a new birth by the Holy Spirit. It represents A CHANGE OF NATURE and constitution, not the release and intensification of what is already there. Indeed, it is an "altogether other", just as Christ was - in the deepest reality of His person - an altogether other. In that 'other' He was not known, understood, and explicable. He was inscrutable. Not just mysterious, but of another order. There was another intelligence and consciousness. There was another capacity and ability. There was another relationship. This is all true of the individual believer by reason of being "born from above". (See John 1:13, 3:6-7 margin) The Church is the aggregate of SUCH believers, in which what was true of Christ is true of it - deity apart.

He and it are the spiritual MEANING of all symbols, and He definitely said that with His coming the old order of material, symbolical representations had entirely given place to that which they represented. It was no longer things to REPRESENT, but that which they represented WITHOUT THE THINGS (see John 4:20-24) and note that John's Gospel and the Letter to the Hebrews are two great documents of the great transition from the historic, the temporal, the tangible, to the spiritual. The Apostles were moved by the Holy Spirit into that transition. It cost them travail to be so born again, but they got through by Divine

energy.

So spirituality, which is a heavenly other nature and endowment, is the first basic principle of the Church. Let us repeat that the Church is the vessel and embodiment of "the mystery" so often referred to in the New Testament, especially by Paul, and the mystery WAS and is the hidden MEANING of things, and of Israel, but which mystery is now revealed to and in the new order, the new Israel, the Church. The "mystery of Christ" is the meaning of Christ, inscrutable to all but those who have "the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him" (*italics ours*).

Our space is gone, so we must continue later. There is much more to say.

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