

The Church Local

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Church local must be a true representation of the universal Church, born out of heaven, and characterized by suffering, an encounter with God, and Christ's Lordship.

Scripture: Ephesians 4:4

Topics: "Unity in the Church", "The Local Church's Role"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of the local church as a representation of the universal Church, highlighting that while the Letter to the Ephesians presents a grand vision of the Church, it was addressed to local congregations facing challenges and potential divisions. He warns against superficial unity efforts that lack spiritual depth and stresses the need for a true corporate expression of Christ's Body, which is born out of divine life and spiritual encounters. Sparks illustrates that a local church should embody the power of Christ's resurrection, be nourished by the Word, and reflect the organic unity of believers, transcending earthly divisions. He calls for a church that is birthed from the travail of Christ and emphasizes the necessity of a profound encounter with God for both individuals and the church as a whole. Ultimately, he urges believers to maintain a focus on Christ's Lordship and the mission of the Church amidst challenges.

Transcript

It is of considerable importance to note that, although the "Letter to the Ephesians" is a majestic presentation of the Church in its entirety, ranging every dimension of the eternities and realms and ages and setting forth the profound councils of God, the Letter was sent to local churches. This fact has some very challenging and searching implications. We must remind our readers that there is such a thing as a positive and definite revelation of what the Church is and therefore of the basis of its unity. It may be something to take note of that there is such a worldwide concern for and activity in relation to the unity of Christians, and such concern should find us in full heart sympathy with it. The big difference is between a massive effort on the one hand to solve the problem from the outside by trying to stick all the broken pieces together and in some way make them fit, and on the other hand a concern to recover the spiritual power which will make for a spontaneous coming and fitting together. The one is the organized, composite collection and assemblage, as of a machine; the other is the organic, spontaneous relationship of a corporate life. The former will come unstuck repeatedly. The latter will eventually emerge "a glorious Church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing."

But what about the Church as locally represented? We must remember that when Paul wrote this Letter and sent it to the churches in localities, he was very well aware of the trends, or even the actual movements toward "departure" and breakdown in the churches. He had foretold it as to Ephesus when he left the elders of that church near the ship on his way to Jerusalem: "I know that after my departing grievous wolves shall enter in among you... and from among your own selves shall men arise... to draw away... after them" (Acts 20:29,30). That was incipient division. But here from his prison in Rome he will write, "all that are in Asia (in Asia) turned away from me."

Two Letters will soon be written to Timothy (who was probably in Ephesus) which will deal with the beginnings of the change from primal Christianity to all that it has become now. They were intended to warn against the ecclesiasticism, clericalism, ritualism, sacramentalism, etc., which have invaded the Church and changed its primitive character. No, Paul's head was not in the clouds and his feet off the earth when he deliberately wrote this Letter as to what the Church is. No doubt his reference to the spiritual warfare was because he knew so well that the battle was on in particular relationship with this very matter, showing of how great a consequence it is to the Satanic forces. It is impressive how any stand for a true expression of the Body of Christ is fraught with more conflict than anything else. If it is a congregation, that is, a number of individual Christians resorting to a given place for "Public Worship," without any corporate Church life and order; or if it is a Mission Hall mainly for preaching the Gospel to the unsaved; or, again, if it is a preaching centre where people go to hear a well-known preacher--all these will go on in the quiet way with little opposition from within or without. But, let there be a movement in the direction of a real corporate expression of a Holy Spirit constituted testimony to Christ corporate, then the battle is on and nothing will be untried to break that up, discredit it, or in some way nullify that testimony.

The Book of Nehemiah is a very good illustration of this many-sided hostility. Again we point to "Ephesians" as relating vicious spiritual antagonism to the essential purpose of the Letter. In this first particular, the universal is transferred to the local, and the local takes character from the universal. A true representation of the elect Body of Christ is a standing menace and ominous sign to the Satanic Kingdom because it is the Church which--at last--is going to dispossess and supplant the "world-rulers of this darkness" and govern with Christ. Would to God that God's people would view all their divisions and internal troubles in this light, instead of always attributing them to "second causes!" This is the first implication in Paul's passing to local churches the whole immense revelation of "The Mystery." There are several other features and factors in this Letter which carry such tremendous significances. There is that factor which the Apostle mentions with one of his superlatives. "The exceeding greatness of His power to usward who believe, according to that working of the strength of His might which He wrought in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead..." (1:19). "And you did He quicken, when ye were dead" (2:1). The church locally represented should be and should embody the testimony to "the power of His resurrection." It should, in its history and constant experience--as more than doctrine-- declare that Christ is risen.

The impression primarily given should be one of livingness. The testimony should be that, although you may be jaded, weary, too tired even to make the journey; disheartened and despondent; physically, mentally and spiritually drained--you come away renewed, refreshed, reinvigorated and lifted up. The activity of Divine life has just resulted in a spiritual uplift. Note the way in which that has been said: "the activity of Divine life." We have not said: "the life of human activity." There is an illusion or delusion in much Christianity and in many "churches" that activity is essentially spiritual life. Hence, stunts, programmes, attractions, "special efforts," and an endless circle of "specials." All this is too often with a view to giving the impression of life, or even creating or stimulating "life." It may be the life of works, and

not the works of life. Life will work, but works are not always life. That was the indictment of the church at Ephesus: "I know thy works... but..." (Rev. 2:2). Divine life is spontaneous and not forced. The dead (spiritually) are raised, and not by artificial means. The Lord of the Church is the risen Lord, and His attestation is resurrection life. So "the power of His resurrection" should be the hallmark of a truly New Testament church. So often we quote our Lord's own words, almost as a formula: "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I." At the same time the atmosphere may be heavy, uninspiring and devoid of a ministration of Divine life. Is this really consistent with the presence of the risen Lord?

We proceed with the implications of this Letter. If the church local is a true microcosm of the Church universal, then this Letter will show us that in the local representation there should--and can--be abundance of wholesome and upbuilding food. Our Letter has fed and stimulated believers through many centuries, and still the food-values are unexhausted. The ministry in a true local expression of the Body of Christ should be an anointed ministry, and because it is such, no hungry soul should ever go away unfed. Not just studied and 'got up' addresses or discourses, but a message from heaven making it possible for people to say, "we have been truly fed today." This means that the Lord's people, being nourished, are growing in spiritual stature, capacity, and responsibility. Not just increasing in mental knowledge or doctrine, but really knowing the Lord. The criterion of a church's value is the measure of Christ Himself in His members. This is not mere idealism, it is the normal state of a truly Holy Spirit constituted church in any place. Paul's use of the word "riches" in this Letter indicates how spiritually wealthy any company of the Lord's people should be.

We have earlier shown that the man behind the Letter is, in his spiritual history, identical with his message. We shall now seek to show that, in several respects, the history of the Church, universal and local, should follow that spiritual history of the Apostle.

1. The church in any locality should be born out of heaven. It is the aggregate or corporate fellowship of born-from-above believers. What, then, is to be true of every individual believer must be true of the corporate company. That goes right to the very root of the Church conception, and it will be as well if we settle it here and now that, in the Scriptures, no other such thing is known or recognized as having a right to that name--Christian Church. That will sift our consideration down from an immense amount that takes the name but is not the true thing. Christendom or Christianity has become a colossus of a thing which is the home of every kind of bird in creation. To try to make a unity of such is a trick of him whose "fowls of the air" they are; naturally, some better, some worse, but far from all born again or from above (John 3:5-13). This just means that every local company of believers, right at its beginning as such, should be something done by the sovereign Holy Spirit. Inasmuch as the Church takes its character from its "Head," its "Firstborn," its "Chief Cornerstone," the "Foundation," it must in every representation have its origin in heaven and embody the life of heaven. That means that formation by man's action is ruled out. It is not an "institution," it springs out of life. It should be possible to say of any local church--or the Church in any locality--"That was an act of God." Mark you, we are seeking to get right to the root of this matter of what the Church is, and what it is not. The former is our real concern. Study what--in the Gospels--Jesus said about Himself and about men, and you have the key to what the Church really is.

2. That leads to the next thing as to the "local church." If the Church was born of the Holy Spirit, it was born out of the travail of God's Son; then the law of travail must lie right at the origin of any true representation of both. In the New Testament the Church universal and the churches local came out of real travail. The travail, agony, and pain of Christ gave birth to the Church at Pentecost. Those who were its nucleus were baptized into His passion. They suffered the breaking of their souls when Jesus died.

Hence their ecstatic joy when He rose again. John 16:21,22 was literally fulfilled in their case. That needs no enlarging upon. But what of the churches? Can we put our finger upon a New Testament church which was not born out of and into suffering? Immediately such a church was in view the battle for its very life, its very existence, began. Stonings, imprisonments, lashes, chasings, intrigues, slanders, persecutions of every kind lay at the emergence of every such potential representation of Christ corporately. Someone had to pay a price and the churches were the price of blood and tears. When power is lost, perhaps through neglect, foolishness, strife, division, formalism, or the loss of the sense of the value of the truth, or for any other reason, the only way of recovery will be that of a fresh baptism into sorrow, remorse, tears and travail. This is surely the right interpretation of the Second Letter to the Corinthians after the First. This also surely is the key to the situation in most of the churches in Revelation two and three. It is definitely implied in the case of Laodicea. A church which does not suffer for its life is, by all the laws of nature and grace, a weak and ineffective church.

3. Still pursuing the line of Paul's history and the Church, we have to say that a local expression of the Church--and all its members--must be the result of an encounter with God in Christ. Any corporate or personal ministry which is to be as fruitful as was Paul's, even in a more limited degree, must have such an encounter at its beginning. The Cross and the Resurrection of Christ were such for the nucleus, the representative company. The Cross was devastating and desolating to all the self-sufficiency, self-assurance, self-confidence, pride, ambition, and presumption of man. The Resurrection was the invasion and taking over of the life of Another. This is so clearly seen in the case of the man who, more than any other, represented that nucleus, namely Simon Peter. He was a man broken and shattered by the Cross, but reconstituted on another basis by the Resurrection. As to the great unveiling of the "Mystery" of Christ and His Body--the Church--Paul's devastation and very survival was by this encounter on the road to Damascus. Such an encounter, sooner or later, personal and collective, must lie at the foundation of a true corporate life. It may be at the beginning or it may be later. It may be a recovery necessary after failure. Many a church, and many a servant of God, has had history cut in two by such an encounter. Before it, an ordinary, limited and comparatively powerless ministry. After it, a release and enlargement, with much spiritual fruitfulness. A little book published by the Moody Press, Chicago, called *Crises Experiences in the Lives of Noted Christians* is an example of this in a number of instances.

4. If the Church universal is above all earthly differences, then the local church ought to be super-national, super-denominational, super-interdenominational, in spirit, fellowship, and outreach. We have often said that Christ cannot be confined or fitted exclusively to any category that is of this world. His temperament overlaps all the categories. His nationality, time, teaching and person suit and meet the need of all, but He cannot be the sole property of any. We have seen works of man's artistic imagination purporting to depict the great scene in Revelation five: "And the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands." In the artist's portrayal, with all the good meaning in the world, the artist painted in people of every nation, colour, physique, dress, complexion, age and stature. Well, as we have said, the motive and intention was good, but who can describe resurrection bodies? "Fashioned like unto His glorious body" (Phil. 3:21, A.V.); "It is raised a spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15:44). We can be quite sure that everything that has come in as the result of man's failure, causing estrangement and what is 'foreign,' will be gone for ever.

The point is that if Christ and what is of Him by the Holy Spirit is the constitution of the Church, then our meeting, our fellowship, our communion must be on the ground of that which is of Christ in all believers. We are referring to the basic life of all true Christians. When it comes to the work of the Lord, there may be

things which we cannot accept, while we still hold to the ground of one life. This is surely the meaning of the Lord's Table. In "Ephesians" Paul sees only one Church, while he knows all about the many churches. There may be a million loaves and cups and tables in true evangelical Christianity in every nation under heaven. But the Lord only sees one loaf and one cup. Even when the local loaf is broken and "divided among yourselves," the Lord still only sees one loaf. Christ can be shared but not divided; He remains one Christ in "ten thousand times ten thousand" believers who share His life. When the Lord does something in us and thereby changes our mind about former acceptances, the temptation and battle can so easily be to become separate in spirit from those who --as yet--have not been so changed, and then the almost incorrigible inclination sets in to make a "sect" of that particular complexion or experience. While there may be real values and vital values in God's dealings with us which we strongly desire all others to know and experience, we must never make our experience a wall between us and all true children of God. The only way of hope and prospect is to shut our eyes to much that may offend our spiritual sensibilities (providing it is not sinfulness in the life) and to get on with the positive course of as much fellowship in Christ as is possible by the grace of God, always avoiding like the plague any attitude or talk which can be justifiably interpreted as spiritual superiority. Misunderstandings because of ignorance, prejudice or insufficient investigation are inevitable, but even such must not be allowed to close our hearts and turn us in on ourselves. While the wall of the New Jerusalem does mean a definite limit to and demarcation of what is "within" and what is "without" as to Christ, we must remember that it is "twelve thousand furlongs" in every direction, which symbolism is intended to signify how great Christ is and, therefore, how great His Church is.

When Paul set himself to write the First Letter to the Corinthians, he knew that he was going to deal with the partisan and sectarian spirit. He therefore opened the Letter with the true ground and range of Christian fellowship: "Sanctified in Christ Jesus, called saints, with all that call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place, their Lord and ours." In this same dimension he closed the Letter to the "Ephesians": "Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in uncorruptness."

5. If it is true, as we have been trying to show, that Paul's history embodied the principles of the revelation that became his "Stewardship," one further feature of that history must be noted and taken up in the church local. That is, an overmastering apprehension of Christ. "I was apprehended by Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12). The word "apprehended" is a strong word. It means to be arrested, overpowered, appropriated and brought under control. It is the word used in John one, verse five regarding light and darkness: "And the darkness overcame (apprehended) it (the light) not." It is also used in relation to the power of demons in possession. As the outcome of this apprehending, Paul always spoke of himself as "the prisoner of Jesus Christ" and "the bond-slave of Jesus Christ" and as 'bearing branded in his body the marks of Jesus.' This experience, born of an event, meant for Paul the loss of all independence, self-direction, self-government, and the rule of the world. It meant the absolute Lordship of Christ. Here was a man who had one overmastering concern for Jesus Christ. Not for a this or a that, but for a Person. His first ejaculation on the encounter was "Who art Thou, Lord?", and in capitulation he followed up with "What shall I do, Lord?" That Lordship was no mere doctrine to him, it was a complete mastery. Very personal; for of the many double calls in an encounter with God,--such as "Abraham, Abraham!" "Jacob, Jacob!" "Moses, Moses!" "Samuel, Samuel!" "Martha, Martha!" "Simon, Simon!"--the last was by no means the least: "Saul, Saul!" Such a real sense of being called with a purpose must be a constituent of and in any true local church. To lose the sense of vital vocation, purpose and destiny is to lose dynamic and to become an existence rather than an impact.

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