

The Conflict (Continued)

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Church is the spiritual relatedness of the children of God, and its expression and safeguarding depend on the sovereign life of the Lord Jesus, preserved by the working of the Cross against death and the flesh.

Scripture: Haggai 2:6, Zechariah 4:6, Matthew 16:18, Ephesians 6:11, 1 John 2:19

Topics: "Spiritual Warfare", "Nature of the Church"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the true nature of the Church as a spiritual relatedness and active functional unity among the children of God, highlighting that mere possession of life is insufficient without functioning as a cohesive body. He warns against the dangers of becoming entangled in unscriptural systems and stresses the importance of maintaining a spiritual position grounded in the Lordship of Christ. The sermon addresses the conflict faced by the Church against opposing forces of evil, asserting that the Church must operate collectively to confront these challenges. Sparks encourages believers to recognize their interdependence and the necessity of corporate action in overcoming spiritual frustration and opposition. Ultimately, he calls for a renewed commitment to the life of Christ within the Church as the key to fulfilling its divine purpose.

Transcript

The True Nature of the Church

That makes it necessary to say just a few words here in parenthesis about the true nature of the Church. What is the Church? Well, to begin with, it is the spiritual relatedness of the children of God. That is the first, shall I say the lowest, level of the meaning of the Church, the most elementary, the starting point - the spiritual relatedness of all children of God; and it is not necessary for me to take up time to say that all truly born-again children of God have a basic and fundamental oneness, that they share one common life. That we know. But that is where the Church begins. That is what the Church is in its beginnings - a spiritual relatedness, by the possession of all of this one life which is the life of the Lord Jesus Christ.

But we must not leave it there. The Church is that, but the Church is something more than that. The Church is the active functional relatedness of the children of God. We have said in a previous meditation that it is one thing to possess life in a human body, but it may be quite another thing for that human body to be functioning as a body. It may be, poor thing, lying there alive, and yet for all practical purposes be as good as dead, useless. It is not a functioning thing. The whole of its organism may be upset, its co-ordination of function may be destroyed. And can you think that the Lord looks upon His people with

anything of real contentment when He sees that they have life, but as a functioning related Body there is little or nothing? Surely we cannot think that the Lord is satisfied with that? What the Lord would call His Church is not just something that has His life. When He would say, "I will build my church", and speak of "My Church", He would think of His Church as a related and functioning thing, and not just a thing which possesses the gift of His life. In the thought of God, to answer to His thought and purpose, the Church is this active, related, functional oneness of His people.

It is there that all our difficulties and problems arise. Things become, of course, very practical, and it is just there that a lot of people get into a great deal of confusion and mess, because they fail to recognise that to have spiritual fellowship, and to cooperate with what is of the Lord in His people, is one thing, but to be actively associated with what is unscriptural in men's systems is another thing. I mean this, that some people think that, in order to have fellowship with certain Christians, you have to go into the thing where they are, and become part of it; their systems, their denominations, their religious orders. In order to show that you are in fellowship, you must go in. That is quite another thing from active spiritual fellowship with them as the Lord's children on a spiritual basis.

The point of departure arises here. When anybody says, either in words, inference, or by their attitude, "If you are going to prove your fellowship with me, you have to come in and belong to what I am in, and work with me in that", then that is another question altogether from this one of spiritual relatedness. That is where all the difficulties arise, and that is where the Lord so often has to make His drastic breaks.

The two difficulties are these. In order to get a real living expression of the Church as a functioning related thing, so often the Lord has to break in upon that impingement of systems upon people and cut them clear. He has to. It is unfortunate, it is a pity, but if you put it to the test, you find it is usually that way. The system impinges and becomes something which is distinct from that heavenly, spiritual and universal nature of the Church. It is something which is sectarian, and, being that, is schismatic and divides the Lord's people here on the earth, and the Lord so often has to cut right into that, and to draw His people away from it, and put them on neutral ground where they can live and function, not as something apart from the children of God, but as something which is not a part of something that is unscriptural.

Then the next difficulty is for such people to maintain a purely spiritual position without becoming another sect. That is a very practical difficulty, but it can be done. But it calls for much watchfulness and a constant guardedness against anything, not only in your doctrine, but in your spirit, in your mentality, in your attitude to others, constant vigilance against the coming in of the spirit of that which you are supposed to have left behind. Oh, the difficulties are very real and very practical, but not insuperable.

Life the Answer to Every Problem

It resolves itself mainly into a question of life. Life is the answer to every problem. Oh, I do feel, beloved, that God's universe is entirely constituted on the biological principle. It is the answer to everything, the explanation of everything, the principle of realisation; the infinite wisdom of God in just resolving everything into one simple proposition and method, and saying, "I will put life into a seed, and I can leave it! I do not begin by forming this flower, making so many petals, shaping them, colouring them, and then building them into one another, and joining them up and fastening them on to a stem, and working like that. That is artificial. I will put life into a seed and leave it, and presently you will have the flower, the perfect flower". That life itself has all that organism, all that organization, all that shaping, all that colour, all that form. The life has it, and if the life is only given a chance, it will produce that, it will be manifested,

whether it be by the flower or the tree, or the bird, or the fish or the animal, or the man. Everything is the result of the life which has the peculiar nature of that organism in it, and if once that life can be introduced and given a chance, you will have the organism. That is the biological secret of God in realising His creation.

But the natural creation is only a type of the spiritual. It was only intended to be that. The spiritual is on that principle, and the secret and solution of everything in the spiritual realm is the biological principle. Put the life of God's Son into anyone and give it a chance, let that life be sovereign, let that life have free course, let that life be in lordship, and you can leave it. You need not fret over trying to put members together, and make them look pretty, nice, happy and cheerful. Oh no, the life will do it. God has one key, namely, the sovereign life of His own beloved Son given a chance unhindered. The result will be as sure as day follows night, and this whole matter of the expression of the Church, and the safeguarding of a true expression of the Church, is just a matter of the Lord's life; that life preserved by the working of the Cross all the time against death, its great enemy, and the ground upon which death works, which is the flesh. Let the Cross be kept there over the flesh, the ground of spiritual death, preserving the life, and we need not worry about the technique; that will look after itself. Church technique will look after itself if the Cross is doing its work and the life is having its way; which only means the sovereignty of the Lord Jesus expressed in the power of His Spirit in terms of life.

We shall be a sect, we shall again be resolved into some thing, as apart from other things on this earth amongst the Lord's people, if we get down on to any other level and ground than that of the sovereign headship and life of the Lord Jesus. Get down on to the ground of teaching, on to the ground of spiritual leaders, men, or on to any other ground, and we shall become some thing. But maintain that position in relation to the living, exalted Lord Jesus, holding fast the Head, and whatever people may say, the truth remains that there we shall have a living expression of God's thought of the Church, a company of the Lord's people on the basis of heavenliness, spirituality, universality, in life.

I would like to stay much longer with that, but I trust that sufficient has been said to indicate this tremendous difference. So the Church is that spiritual relatedness in a functioning way, on the basis of the Lordship of Christ in life; the risen Lord in the midst, where nothing of man has a place. It is on that basis that we are to seek fellowship, and if it really comes to the point, we must be prepared to say: "Look here, I will meet you on spiritual ground, the ground of Christ, the ground of our one life, I will co-operate with you in all that is truly spiritual, but if you want me to come into your organization, to become part of your system and join in your institutions, then you put up a barrier, you interfere with fellowship". Now, that is not a denial of the Church, that is not a contradiction of oneness. To take that course is simply to refuse the imposition by anyone of something that is not of the Lord, not scriptural, something that is extra to our spiritual life and fellowship; and where men will do that, there is the interruption. We must remain on the free ground of the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit.

Now, that is very practical; but, beloved, do not forget that bound up with that is the whole question of spiritual fulness. The whole matter of the fulness of Christ is bound up with our being on the ground of His Lordship and of His life, and not on any other artificial ground as made by men. And that raises other practical points. Oh, all the practical points are raised by that.

The Church and the Opposing Forces of Evil

The Church, we are saying, is a thing which functions in relatedness. Well, conflict is mainly connected with this Lordship of Jesus Christ, and the Lordship of Jesus Christ is bound up mainly with the Church: so that the conflict is to be dealt with by the Church. You see, the opposing forces of evil are to be met by the Church. "I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it", said our Lord (Matt. 16:18), as though the Church were the main objective of the powers of evil. It is the Church and the gates of Hades. Well now, those powers of evil have to be met by the Church in representation. And here let me warn you to be very careful of single-handed assault upon the powers of evil. If you do, you will find yourself unable to meet them; and that is saying a thing very imperfectly. You will find that you will be mightily knocked about. Be very careful of making personal, singlehanded, individual assaults upon the powers of evil. This is a Church matter. The Church may be represented by just two or three. The corporate principle is essential. That does not mean that you are not personally to resist the Devil, that you are not personally to stand, and withstand, but if you are going to make assault upon strongholds of the Evil One, you will need to stand on Church ground for that: for the Lord has made this a Church matter, a corporate matter, that is to say; and doubtless you have proved it. Some situations can never be touched single-handed; you have to call in co-operation. Well, the Lord holds us to that. If you have professed to have seen the Church, the Body of Christ, if you have given any testimony to it, the Lord will hold you to it; you will not get through a situation singlehanded. He will make you come to the Church about it, and your whole life will simply be tied up until you make a Church matter of it. The Lord is very jealous over His Church. Satan can make an awful mess of a life, if that life moves out to meet spiritual antagonism without the Church.

Do lay to heart what is being said, for it may touch you at many points. It is very true. Do you really know Church life? You understand, when I speak about Church life, I am not talking about what men call "the Church". I am talking about the spiritual relatedness of the Lord's children, the interdependence of the members of Christ. They do depend upon one another, and the Lord has ordered it that it shall be so, and in the main issues the Lord will hold us to that. We can go out to our work and be withstood effectually by the enemy, if we do not recognise this law of God, that the Church has to move with us and we with the Church. There has to be a corporate life in this matter. If you did but realise and recognise it, dear friends, you would see that this is the explanation of so much frustration. Go back to Ezra and recall how they put the altar in its place, and laid the foundation of the house of the Lord. They got no further than that, before the adversaries came on the scene. And what did they do? Well, they did all sorts of things; but it is all summed up in one word, they set themselves to frustrate the work. Frustrate! Oh, this terrible sense of frustration! Are you conscious of that? Frustration! No word suits the situation better than that. You make a move, you are brought to a standstill. You move again, and again you are brought to a standstill. There is no getting through. It is frustration, frustration in all directions. I am glad that word is there.

Well, the people fell for a time under that frustration, and were held up for a number of years. But the Lord did not accept that, and God re-acted to that. "The Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel... and Joshua" (Hag. 1:21), through the prophesying of Haggai and Zechariah, and the Lord said, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit" (Zech. 4:6). The frustration of the Evil One is countered by the Holy Spirit through the Church. The Church is the instrument of the Holy Spirit's work against the enemy. Oh, may the Lord give us a new sense of the tremendous importance of the functioning reality of the Church!

We are speaking of what the Church is. It is something more than an entity just possessing life. It is a functioning relatedness of the children of God, and its function on the one hand is to counter this tremendous challenge to the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and if there is a new rising up of this corporate

activity, co-operation, amongst the people of God, this frustration of the enemy can be dealt with. We are not going to sit down under this frustration of the enemy, but we must be stirred up in our spirits. My name is not Zerubbabel and not Joshua, but humbly may the Lord be pleased to have the same effect upon you through this word as their word had upon the people of their day, to stir up corporate action against frustration, and to say, We will not accept this frustration of the enemy!

The Wiles of the Devil

Now let us go on. The conflict is always intended to counter the true meaning of the Cross and the true nature of the Church, because they both involve the Lordship of Christ. How is it done? Well, there is a lot of light for us in the Scriptures on this, Paul sums it all up in one word - "the wiles of the Devil" (Eph. 6:11). Both Nehemiah and Ezra will give us a good insight into the wiles of the Devil. The first movement, as you notice in Ezra 4, was along the line of attempted paralyzing through mixture.

The adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of the captivity were building, and they drew near, and said, "Let us build with you: for we seek your God, as ye do; and we do sacrifice unto him..." Let us build! One of the most subtle forms of Satanic activity against the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ is mixture, bringing in elements that profess and pretend to be in true alliance with the purpose, but which in nature are not, but are a contradiction. The enemy is always trying to bring about that state of mixture through alliances with things which are different in their nature.

Oh, let this word search us! Has the Cross really done its work in us, has it been so planted in us that we can say we are not just outwardly associated with a thing, but that deep down in our very being we have a burden about this House of God? What is your relationship to this matter? Really, beloved, is there in you an ache over the state of the House of God? These adversaries - and, with all that they said and professed, they are still adversaries - came and said, We seek your God, we do sacrifice to your God, let us build with you!

Are you quite sure that your association is not merely outward, objective, something with which you have a certain amount of agreement? Are you quite sure that you have gone into this thing and this thing into you, and that deep down in your being there is a real concern and travail about this house? These adversaries had no such concern: they were not really burdened and troubled about the state of the house, as is soon seen. Frustrated along this line, they will seek to frustrate the building of this house.

The Lord must have the pure essence of a real burden concerning the spiritual life of His people. It must be in us, a real concern. It must be true, genuine, our very life, not something from which we can resign and go away, because we meet with some unpleasantnesses, some difficulties, some things that go against our personal interest. Oh, John rightly names those people - "They went out from us, but they were not of us" (1 John 2:19). You cannot go out from something that is your very being.

We may have had thoughts about retiring and giving up, but when it comes to the issue, that which we have perhaps called an 'it', from which we were going to withdraw, that and ourselves were so much one we could not divide between them. The thing is wrought into us in the very fires of God. Are you sure it is like that? The enemy cannot do much with that, but he is always trying to get a conglomeration of people, some really burdened, and others who, however much they think it so, and protest that they serve the same God and offer sacrifices to Him, have but taken something on, and have no real concern deep down in their being. They have but joined themselves to something into which the Holy Spirit has not planted them.

Alliance! And when they failed in that, their subterfuge was exposed. Then they turned, with threats and terrorizing, and moved out to spread a false report and misrepresent these people, saying they were building this temple with the intention of revolting. As to Nehemiah and the building of the wall, the false report was, He intends to make a name for himself, to get a following, to be something himself! False reports, misrepresentation, the Devil's work of opposition; and they brought tremendous pressure against this thing. A little thing comes out in Haggai about it, which I think is significant. You remember as Haggai opens his prophecies, out of which there came the reviving of the building of the temple, he says, "This people say, It is not the time for us to come, the time for the Lord's house to be built." But they had made a start: they had put the altar in its place and they had laid the foundation. They have changed their mind. They have come to another conclusion. "The time is not come, the time that the Lord's house should be built." Why? They had met opposition severe and terrible, opposition from the adversaries, and the adversary had not only opposed from without, but he had got inside and made a suggestion, and his inward suggestion was this: You see all these difficulties, these adversaries, these troubles, these persecutions, these misrepresentations; they mean that the Lord does not want you to do it, this means the Lord's time has not come; if the Lord's time had come, the thing would go through without any difficulty! Has it ever been so? Tell me the time when the Lord did a great thing and it went through without opposition. You have difficulty in finding a time in history when hell has not risen up when God has set Himself to do a new thing. Satan says, The opposition means the Lord's time is not yet come, the Lord is not with you in it; if He were, He would carry you through swimmingly. It never has been like that. But you see how Satan gets inside and gives a false implication to difficulties, and says, If the Lord were with you, you would have no difficulties; the Lord would simply carry you through without any trouble at all! No, not at all; that is the work of the enemy, to hinder by any and every means he can, because of the tremendous issue that is involved.

Now, ask the Lord to show you what it means, to make this word to have real issues in your own lives, to get what He really has set His heart upon. And do not forget the enemy will seek to frustrate. I think he has been at it in this Conference, by the spirit of death, of blinding, of paralyzing. Oh, ask the Lord to stir up your spirit to resist this. Say, If the Lord is seeking to do something, then I resist all paralysis of mind and spirit, all deadness, and I stand for the Lord's purpose to come clear!

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