

The Cross and the Church

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Church is the vessel and vehicle of Christ's fullness, and its expression involves nothing less than God's eternal purpose and satisfaction.

Scripture: Ephesians 1:22

Topics: "The Church as the Body of Christ", "The Role of the Cross in the Church"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the integral relationship between the Cross and the Church, asserting that the Church is the primary vessel through which the fullness of Christ, the Holy Spirit, salvation, and the promise of Christ's return are expressed. He warns against separating these doctrines from the Church, as doing so leads to a disembodied faith lacking true vitality and purpose. The Church, as the Body of Christ, is not defined by earthly distinctions or denominational lines but is a spiritual entity that embodies Christ's life and mission. Sparks highlights the necessity of recognizing the Church's organic nature and the importance of the Cross in facilitating a true expression of Christ within the Church. Ultimately, he calls for believers to embrace the transformative power of the Cross to fully realize their identity and purpose within the Church.

Transcript

Having dealt with the four intersections on our diagram - the Cross and the Person of Christ, the Holy Spirit, the So Great Salvation, and the Coming Again - we proceed to note that these pass into and through - in the first place - the circle marked the Church which is His Body.

Both in its teaching as to the eternal election of the Church and its present vocation, and also in the actual expression at the beginning of this dispensation, the Bible shows that the FIRST sphere in which all the content and meaning of those four magnitudes finds expression is the Church. It is not our intention to deal with the analysis of each given in the diagram, but a glance at that analysis will do two things. It will show what each of the four means and contains, and it will explain the nature and vocation of the Church.

One thing must be said here, although it should be obvious: these four stand together, and unless they ARE kept as a whole the Church is not the Church of God's intention and purpose. We shall come on this again later.

It is IN and by the Church that God has eternally chosen to reveal the meaning of Christ - the Person of His Son. So also is it there that all the meaning and value of the Holy Spirit is to be embodied. The So

Great Salvation is that which constitutes the Church, defining both its nature and its vocation. The coming again of Christ has its primary meaning IN the Church. We repeat, to separate these from their right relation to the Church, to leave the Church out and to take the doctrines apart from it, is to render the doctrines disembodied spirits, with no actual and practical vehicle of demonstration or expression - something in themselves. To have something called the Church which does not EXPRESS these four is to have a misnomer, a falsehood, a body without a spirit or personality, a plastic body without nerves or living expression.

The first main thing to say then is that

The Church Is THE Object Of Divine Concern

in relation to Christ.

In the eternal counsels of the Godhead, when it was determined that the consummate issue of the intended created universe should be the summing up of all things in Christ, it was then decided that an elect Body - called the Church, which is His Body - should be the vessel and vehicle of His fullness, the complement of Him That filleth all in all: nothing less and nothing other than the Church. God has never stopped short at individuals, many or few, as related to Himself. He could have made a thousand Adams as easily as one, but He did not, because one Adam is generic and indicates many in one, the corporate life of many in one. This was the basic principle in Abraham, Jacob, David, Christ. Ignore or violate the corporate and organic principle embodied in the Church, and substitute an institution, an organization, a fraternity, and you make the continuation beyond one generation a matter of the replacement of the worn parts of a machine, and not the reproduction of organic life. What is not the Church in its full Divine concept will only get so far and then live on its past, its tradition, its founder, and its publicity. There have been, and are, many such things which, because of a specific need (to which we refer later), have been blessed of God and cared for by Him, and which have become ministries in themselves within restricted limits. Beyond a certain point of value they are not organically reproductive; they are not sending forth in an ORGANIC way their seed to fully and livingly express the fullness of Christ. There have been so many of these things which, while valuable and owned of the Lord as a needed ministry for the hour, because of His love for them have been presented by Him with His fuller thought. This has represented a definite crisis. The issues have been no less than, on the one hand, adjustment unto enlargement and a new lease of life and value: or, on the other hand, because of unwillingness to see that God needed such changes, a quiet, steady, almost imperceptible loss of the old character and vitality, and either a closing down toward the end of the lifetime of the first instruments, or the formation of a Trust to carry on the work. So often it has become like the tent in Shiloh without the Testimony in it.

The Lord may bless, even raise up, instruments, ministries, to serve a specific purpose, to emphasize or recover a lost value, but there comes a time when He sees that the need has now arisen for the related feature and character to be recognized and accepted, and He sees to it that the light concerning this is present or available. Everything of future increase hangs in the balances of the reaction of those concerned and responsible. God will never ultimately stop short of His full thought - the Church. Herein lies one of the aspects of the relatedness of the Cross to the Church. Only as it is proved that the Cross has produced a true adjustableness and enlargement to all the thought of God can God go on with us INDEFINITELY. It is fatal eventually to have a fixity of mind that because a beginning was so definitely of God it is fixed and will never have to be advanced upon and adjusted to the further things of God. God is not necessarily cancelling anything that has been owned of Him, but He would put it into its larger place.

The fact is that, if God is going to have His full thought concerning the Church - even in a comparatively small company - because things are as they are now many adjustments will have to be made. It is no less than a life or death issue, a gain or loss question, and this is decided by the measure in which the meaning of the Cross has really been apprehended. All the tremendous significance of the "ifs" of the New Testament relate to this, not to salvation when the "if" is addressed to Christians.

This necessitates our saying something concerning which the Word of God teaches as to

What The Church Is

Because of its immense importance to the Lord's eternal purpose concerning His Son, there are few directions in which the great enemy has given himself more assiduously than in this to bring confusion, misapprehension, delusion, illusion, and disruption. The very fact that, on the one hand, the Church bears such evident marks of the Spoiler, and on the other hand, because of the confusion and mess so many true servants of God have turned to other than Church ministry in its full sense, should impress us with the significance of this matter from Satan's viewpoint. Nothing that implies the Church principles of corporate life - oneness, fellowship, and organic relatedness - fails to be the immediate object of Satanic interest and concern, to divide, confuse, and break up, and the devilish factor in it makes it more than just a matter of human disagreement. It is something much more subtle and difficult to deal with than that. The real trouble is not finally cleared up with apologies. In the light of this it is necessary to have some understanding and apprehension as to the true nature of the Church.

Of course, one of the governing things in deciding what the Church is is our standpoint. While the building with a spire or tower is so often called a church - and no one with any spiritual intelligence believes that it is - it will serve as an illustration of a major point. Supposing you saw such a building called a church standing on its spire with its main building right up where the top of the spire usually is, what would you say about it? You would say two things. One: "It is upside down." The other: "It is top heavy." Perhaps you would say: "It is absurd!" But that would entirely depend upon your standpoint. Supposing you were up 10,000 feet in an airplane and viewed it as though the cloud-ceiling was your earth? There it would be right, and IT WOULD BE UPSIDE DOWN IF IN ITS USUAL POSITION HERE. It depends upon whether our standpoint is earthly or heavenly. From the standpoint of the New Testament - which is "in the heavenlies" - the Church as it is now on the earth is upside down. Its main bulk is earthly, and its smallest point is heavenly. I have no doubt that whoever invented the church steeple intended it to indicate that the Church points to heaven, which, of course, is true. But there is this other way of looking at it. Really from God's standpoint the Church has no connection with this world IN THIS DISPENSATION beyond testimony. It is NOT mainly pointing upward, but, being a heavenly thing, is testifying downward. To link the Church with this world at present in any other way is to forfeit all that is really vital to its impact UPON the world. The Church therefore cannot be a national thing, nor can it be international. There is no such thing with God as the Chinese Church, the Indian Church, the American Church, or the English Church. The Church belongs to no country. It can only be the Church IN any country or countries. Nor is the Church composed of all nations or nationalities - Asiatics, Americans, Europeans, etc. There "cannot be Greek and Jew" in the Church. To think and speak and act as though there were is to have failed lamentably to see God's thought as to the Church, and it DOES matter VERY much whether we are right or wrong in this.

In the same way, and belonging to a true apprehension of the Church, we must see that it can never be denominational, interdenominational, nor undenominational as such. A world federation of "churches"

would altogether miss the Divine idea, and as lamentably break down in its spiritual value as did the League of Nations; it would be just another spiritual fiasco.

The Church MAY or MAY NOT be found somewhere inside ALL of the above, but it is other than they are.

It will be seen that, so far, we are on a negative line, and this has to be pursued a little further yet. There are sincere people of God who need to be reminded that the Church is not constituted upon some special line or measure of Divine revelation. Light as to the Church or the Body of Christ does not MAKE those who have it the Church. The Church is not made by seeing a FULLER meaning of the Cross or the Body. Important as this is in relation to EXPRESSION it is not basic to the FACT.

There are many other negative factors which affect this issue, but they will be covered as we proceed to the positive side. If we are actuated or influenced by the things as above mentioned, it is because we have not yet, after all, seen Christ.

The Church Is For The Expression Of Christ

Christ - the Son of God, the Son of Man - is not a Jew in His resurrection person and humanity. Neither is He of any other nationality. He is altogether other. What nationality was the first Adam? He was racial. In Christ God has gone back behind all these subsequent distinctions and differences, which the Bible attributes to Satan and rebellion, and He has gone beyond these to the grand issue when oneness will be absolute in every respect - Christ being all and in all actually and universally, as He is NOW where God's mind is concerned. For GOD'S Church there is no ground but the ground of Christ. What is of ourselves by nature, and what is of this present evil world, is not the Church, for the Church is Christ corporately expressed. Spiritual understanding in this matter will result in our ceasing to talk about "the Church of..." or "Such-and-such a Church." It will be absolutely revolutionary in mentality and issue in adjusted phraseology, but quite spontaneously, not pedantically or affectedly.

To have seen Christ as the Holy Spirit would show Him in the New Testament is to see that the Church begins by

Christ Becoming Resident In Believers

Once Christ is really within as a Resident a union has been established which is organic - in life - and that is Body union. The Lord's Table testifies to this and is for all true believers. That the full light on the Church had not been given in the first days of the Church as in "Acts" is evident, but the fact was there, and they continued "steadfastly in the breaking of bread." (See 1 Corinthians 10:16-17).

But the breaking and distributing of the loaf is never looked upon as making so many more loaves or bodies. It is still one loaf. Christ - though imparted to ten thousand hearts - is not ten thousand Christs, but still one. In this way the Church is Christ.

The growth of the Church is on the same principle. It is the increase of Christ, inwardly and extensively. The Church makes increase as Christ gets more room, or as the measure of Him increases in believers. Its outward growth numerically is just Christ getting into more lives (see Ephesians 4:15-16). The measure of Christ determines whether the Church is strong or weak, great or small, effective or ineffective. But we must not confuse things. Firstly, we must not confuse Christ with systems which have grown up or been formed around Christ or the Church. Then we must not have a mental attitude that because certain believers are in these systems they are not the Church. This can be as divisive in effect as rabid

sectarianism. Then we must not confuse the FACT of the Church and the EXPRESSION of it. This is where many trip up, and it is largely a reaction to the deplorable mixture and spiritual poverty of what is called "the Church."

The FACT of the Church and its EXPRESSION are two things. The fact is that all who are in LIVING union with Christ - Who is Head - are the Church. I know that some teachers such as G. H. Pember do not agree with this, and I know all the problems which arise because of the position taken. How many problems would be solved and difficulties got over if we had a sufficient basis for believing that in this dispensation there are two things - the Church AND the rest of believers! We should, for instance, solve the problem of why so few respond to the testimony concerning the Church. But this will not do. The same problem lies behind why so many never make any response at all to Christ.

The expression of the Church, which is more than the fact, demands a recognition of the absolute Headship of Christ - that is, the doctrine lived out by the Holy Spirit. The Epistles did not put believers into a basic relationship with Christ; they revealed what that relationship was and implied, and showed them where they were as to this. It is possible to have a very crippled, emaciated, and unhealthy body, so far as the outward frame is concerned, but it cannot be said that it is not a body at all. This is how it was in the EXPRESSION of the Body at Corinth. Things could hardly have been worse, and if we heard of such a state existing in a local church today we should be sorely tempted to write it off as having no vital relationship with Christ. Paul did not do this with Corinth; but writing to them as to the Church IN Corinth he just sought to show them Christ and the corporate implications of Christ. It amounted to a question as to the absolute Lordship of Christ.

While all is completed in the Ascended Christ, all believers do not know what that "all" is, and therefore may be failing in the expression. The expression is of such value as to involve nothing less than God's eternal purpose and satisfaction; and, as we have said, the utmost wrath of Satan is directed against any ministry which leads to this, or any expression of the Church in spiritual reality. It is no less an issue than Christ coming fully into His place, and Satan having no more room.

It is therefore of utmost importance that there SHOULD be light as to the Church - the Body. Strength or weakness, we repeat, depends upon this. This is

Where The Cross Comes In

Christ cannot come in until man goes out. This applies initially and progressively. There is no place in Christ for the fallen and Satan-produced judgments, thoughts, energies, feelings, etc., of another man. The measure of Christ depends upon the exit of what is not Christ. This has to be faced as a basic and inclusive fact sooner or later, once for all. Then it has to be recognized that conformity to the image of Christ is a life-process, and this life-process goes on on the basis of the Cross. It is not new dyings of Christ, it is not a repetition of the Cross, once, twice, or many times, but it is an outworking of the once-for-all meaning and implications of the Cross. The presence and effect in the Church of what we are naturally is to limit Christ, and therefore to deny the Church, and therefore to counter the Sovereign Headship of Christ, and therefore to make for spiritual weakness, and THEREFORE to put Satan in the place of power. All this is met by the Cross of Christ. Hence, the Altar stands at the threshold of the House; it is the big Altar - a WHOLE burnt offering. The Cross takes its greatness from the immensity of that to which it relates, and makes possible, in the eternal counsels of God.

If what we have said above raises practical questions for any as to relationship and connections, etc., we do not say that you should do this or that - leave this, join that. All that we say is - Look the Cross fully in the face once more, ask the Lord to show you what it means in His fullest thought, let the Lord Jesus be absolutely Head, meet the challenge, and be obedient to what He shows you.

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