

The Cross: The Basis of the Church

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Cross of the Lord Jesus is meant to lead directly to the Church, and an imperfect apprehension of the Cross leads to a limited spiritual life and a limited spiritual service.

Scripture: Exodus 12:1-14, Ezra 3:1-4, Zechariah 4:6, Matthew 16:18, Ephesians 5:25

Topics: "The Cross", "The Church"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that the Cross of Jesus Christ is foundational to the Church, illustrating this through the rebuilding of the altar and temple in Ezra and Jesus' declaration in Matthew. He explains that the Cross is not an end in itself but a means to establish the Church, and that misunderstanding this leads to a limited spiritual life. Sparks highlights the inevitable conflict that arises when the Cross and the Church are in view, as seen in both the Old and New Testaments. He urges believers to recognize the significance of the Cross as a pathway to a deeper understanding of the Church and God's purpose. Ultimately, he calls for a shift from merely accepting the Cross to embracing its intended outcome: the establishment of the Church.

Transcript

"And when the seventh month was come, and the children of Israel were in the cities, the people gathered themselves together as one man to Jerusalem. Then stood up Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and his brethren the priests, and Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and his brethren, and builded the altar of the God of Israel, to offer burnt-offerings thereon, as it is written in the law of Moses the man of God. And they set the altar upon its base; for fear was upon them because of the peoples of the countries: and they offered burnt-offerings thereon unto Jehovah, even burnt-offerings morning and evening. And they kept the feast of tabernacles, as it is written, and offered the daily burnt-offerings by number, according to the ordinance, as the duty of every day required... From the first day of the seventh month began they to offer burnt-offerings unto Jehovah: but the foundation of the temple of Jehovah was not yet laid... Now in the second year of their coming unto the house of God at Jerusalem, in the second month, began Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and the rest of their brethren the priests and the Levites, and all they that were come out of the captivity unto Jerusalem, and appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to have the oversight of the work of the house of Jehovah... And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of Jehovah, they set the priests in their apparel with trumpets, and the Levites the sons of Asaph with cymbals, to praise Jehovah, after the order of David king of Israel. And they sang one to another in praising and giving thanks unto Jehovah, saying, For he is good, for his

lovingkindness endureth for ever toward Israel. And all the people shouted with a great shout, when they praised Jehovah, because the foundation of the house of Jehovah was laid. But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, the old men that had seen the first house, when the foundation of this house was laid before their eyes, wept with a loud voice; and many shouted aloud for joy: so that the people could not discern the noise of the shout of joy from the noise of the weeping of the people; for the people shouted with a loud shout, and the noise was heard afar off... Now when the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin heard that the children of the captivity were building a temple unto Jehovah, the God of Israel; then they drew near to Zerubbabel, and to the heads of fathers' houses, and said unto them, Let us build with you; for we seek your God, as ye do; and we sacrifice unto him since the days of Esar-haddon king of Assyria, who brought us up hither." (Ezra 3:1-4,6,8,10-13; 4:1-2).

"And I also say unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it... From that time began Jesus to show unto his disciples, that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and the third day be raised up. (Matt. 16:18,21).

We have read those two portions of the Word of God, not because we are going to dwell upon them in particular, but because they bring very clearly and definitely into view the matter upon which the Scriptures as a whole come with very great weight and forcefulness. Both in the Old Testament in type, and in the New Testament in reality, this thing is made very clear, namely, that the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ is meant by God to lead immediately and directly to the Church, and that, when the Cross and the Church are really brought spiritually into view, then an intense state of conflict is set up. That is stating very briefly what, as I have said, the Scriptures throughout make very clear.

You will at once recognise that those three things are clearly seen in the passage in the book of Ezra. They set the altar in its place. That is the Cross. They came to build the house of the Lord. That is the Church. And when the adversaries saw it, they drew near. That is the conflict.

In the passage in the Gospel by Matthew, chapter 16, you have it again. "Upon this rock I will build my church." "From that time Jesus began to show unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and the third day raised up." That is the Cross; and the Cross and the Church being in view, the conflict is begun. And so you will find it everywhere.

Go further back in the Old Testament to the twelfth chapter of the book of Exodus, and you have the same thing, remembering that the book of Exodus opens with a presentation of the sons of Israel, and you know that the sons of a prince with God are found in bondage and are about to be emancipated. Typically the Church is in view. Chapter 12 brings the Cross in as the ground of that emancipation, but it is all surrounded by intense conflict. The battle is joined when the bringing out of those elect people is begun, and the ground upon which the battle is really fought out is the ground of the Cross. You come to the book of the Acts, and it is just the same: the Cross, the Church and the Conflict. It is the three C's all the way through the Scriptures. Well, then, we need to see God's mind about this matter.

In the thought of God, the Cross of the Lord Jesus is meant to lead immediately and directly to the Church. Any apprehension or teaching of the Cross which does not lead directly to the Church is either a misapprehension or only a partial apprehension, and it will inevitably result in a limited spiritual life and a limited spiritual service! The Cross, in God's intention, is never an end in itself. It is a way, it is a means, it

is a basis, it is intended to lead to something else.

You go to another part of the Old Testament type of this. You remember when David, provoked by Satan to number Israel, to take account of natural resources, brought that awful judgment upon the people, the angel with the drawn sword smote up and down the land and was about to strike at Jerusalem itself, when the Lord intervened and said: It is enough, stay now thy sword. David was then by the threshing floor of Ornan, the Jebusite, and Ornan was threshing wheat, and David drew near and bought the threshing floor and built an altar unto the Lord, an altar by which this sin was dealt with, this iniquity was removed, by which the Lord was given His place, and that threshing floor of Ornan where David built the altar became the site of the temple in Jerusalem. It was the very foundation of the temple. If you dwell upon that a little more you will see how many elements of tremendous significance there are in that.

Yes, the Cross is a foundation, a basis, and it is the basis of the Church. They set the altar in its place and then they built the house of the Lord. I repeat, the Cross of the Lord Jesus in the mind of God is intended to lead directly to the Church, and unless it does that there will be progress only within certain very limited dimensions. There will be a straitened spiritual life and a service to the Lord which is lacking in those greater fulnesses of Divine meaning and intention.

I am most anxious that you should see more than I am saying, that you should really grasp the significance of this, and not just take it as something said. It can be put in many different ways.

We can put it like this, that the Lord Himself sees through the Cross a great heavenly object, and that object is His Church. "Christ loved the church and gave himself for it" (Eph. 5:25). There is your precise statement that, in the giving of Himself, which is the Cross of the Lord Jesus, there was an object in view, and that object was the Church. "Christ loved the church and gave himself for it", and if you and I are going to come into God's meaning of the Cross, it will be something more than the forgiveness of sins, something more than justification by faith, something more than the possessing of eternal life, something more than deliverance from Satan and hell, and entitlement to heaven. If we come into God's thought concerning the Cross, we shall very soon come into a heavenly revelation of the Church. The one must follow the other if we are right in oneness with the Lord's thought.

The Result of an Imperfect Apprehension of the Cross

In saying that, beloved, one is touching a good deal of tragic history. There has been a great deal of teaching of the Cross, preaching of the Cross. It has been faithful, it has been sincere, but for want of seeing this very thing, namely, what the Cross is meant to lead to, the results have been very unsatisfactory. That is to say, vast numbers of those who have come into those elementary benefits (if I may so call them,) of the Cross of the Lord Jesus have just remained there, elementary Christians all their lives, and there has been no touching, or very little touching, of the great situation on the earth which is such a terrible denial of God's thought about His people.

You look at the Christian world today, the people of God upon the earth, and what do you feel about the situation? The more you look, the more you know, the more your heart aches and the more you are driven to despair. The conflict between true children of God is the most terrible thing. They are all at variance with one another, they are suspecting one another; suspicion runs rife amongst the people of God. They even go as far as to pray hard against one another. This is not against the enemies of the Lord as pronouncedly so. One could say much, and not exaggerate, about the situation, for the more you know, I say, the more you feel what a situation of impossibility it is amongst Christians on the earth. Ought these things to be so,

brethren? No, we cannot accept that situation as representing God's thought.

Then something is wrong. There is some explanation. It ought not to be so. Why is it? The answer is here. There has been a misapprehension or an imperfect apprehension of the Cross of the Lord Jesus, for the Cross of the Lord Jesus was intended to meet such a contingency and make it impossible; and yet all those concerned have accepted the Cross, that is, they have embraced those elementary values of the Cross, that Christ died for their sins, that by His precious Blood, by faith in His atoning work there is justification from all sin, acceptance with God, deliverance from judgment. Yes, they have accepted the Cross; but all that is but the beginning, the foundation. It is intended to lead to something very much more than that. The Cross is a means in God's thought to a great end, and none of us as the Lord's people must be satisfied with just the means. We must be supremely concerned with God's object through the means.

The Cross Effects a Clearing of the Way for God's End

As a foundation, as a basis, there are various directions in which the Cross has its meaning. We must recognise these because they represent the clearing of the way for this that God is going to bring in.

It is interesting that there in the case of Ezra and those with him, those who came back from the captivity, that they spontaneously, instinctively turned to the building of the house of the Lord, as though it was the accepted thing, the thing taken for granted. It was the thing that had to be done; they simply gave themselves to it. But in order to prepare the way they put the altar in its place, and you notice what is said about that - "for fear was upon them because of the peoples of the countries". This is setting up that which gives assurance, an assurance that they can go on, that they can be established, that they can accomplish the work, that they can build the house, and although the enemies prevailed for a time, it was never the Lord's thought that the work should cease. That altar had secured a way, had secured the accomplishment of the work. If only they had recognised and stood by all the significance of that altar, they would never have stopped building the house for those years, for you know that eventually when the work was resumed, it was because the Lord stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel and Joshua, and further exhorted the people through the prophet in the words, "Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts" (Zech. 4:6); meaning this - You may be weak, a mere remnant back from captivity, there may be the enemies, the peoples of the countries round about all against you, but that altar has secured a way for the Holy Spirit, and in all your weakness you can go on. It is "not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts".

That is exactly how it worked out in the New Testament. Here were these few poor people in Jerusalem who had proved themselves so weak and impotent, having failed at every point and broken down in all directions. Now the Cross is an accomplished fact, giving a way for the Holy Spirit, and that handful of weaklings, not by might, nor by power, but by the Spirit of the Lord of hosts, go right on in the building of the house against terrific odds; but the work goes on.

They put the altar in its place and instinctively turned to the building of the house. The altar cleared the way, and the Cross is just that by which a way is made, getting rid of things that hinder the realisation of God's purpose.

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