

The Divine Purpose and Principles Governing the Christian Life

by T. Austin-Sparks

The purpose of the Christian life is to attain unto the fullness of Christ, which is the continuous enlargement and ultimate finality of life, light, liberty, and love.

Scripture: Romans 8:28, 1 Corinthians 1:13, 2 Corinthians 4:10, 2 Corinthians 5:17, Ephesians 1:11, Ephesians 3:11, Ephesians 4:3, Ephesians 4:13, Philippians 3:10, 2 Timothy 1:9

Topics: "Divine Purpose", "Principles Of Christian Life"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that the Christian life is governed by a divine purpose, which is to attain the fullness of Christ. He explains that this purpose is not merely about being saved but involves a continuous journey of growth and development in Christ. The sermon outlines three key principles that govern this purpose: the Cross, which signifies both the removal of the old self and the establishment of a new creation; relatedness, highlighting the importance of unity among believers; and purity of heart, which fosters openness to God's guidance. Ultimately, the fullness of Christ is a collective experience that requires mutual support and spiritual integrity among Christians.

Transcript

It is most important that we should be alive to the fact that the Christian life is governed by purpose. The thought of 'purpose', indeed that very word itself, is much in view in the New Testament. Most of us are familiar with one statement relating thereto: "To them that love God all things work together for good, even to them that are called according to his purpose" (Rom. 8:28). Unfortunately it is usually cut in half and only part of the first half taken: "all things work together for good". We might go on: "to them that love God"; but that is not the whole statement, which adds: "to them that are the called according to his purpose". Then we have another word, not so generally known: "Foreordained according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his will" (Eph. 1:11). Again: "according to the eternal purpose which he purposed in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Eph. 3:11). Yet once more: "according to his own purpose and grace" (2 Tim. 1:9). These are sufficient at least to indicate that 'purpose' is a governing idea in the Christian life: that we are not saved just to be saved, we do not become Christians just to be Christians. That is only the beginning of something; it is with a view to something very much more in the thought and intention of God.

WHAT THE PURPOSE IS

You are asking, 'Well, what is the purpose?' There are many things said about it in the Scriptures, which we cannot stay to cite just now. Without going into great detail, when all things said about it are gathered together, there is one thing which includes and covers them all, of which they are all just parts. The Divine purpose is all-inclusively set forth in a clause in one of Paul's letters: "till we all attain... unto the... fullness of Christ" (Eph. 4:13). We are going to spend a little time in looking into that, but you will instantly recognise that that makes Christ very great. Surely, if all the Christians that ever have been and are and will yet be are called with the purpose of attaining unto the fullness of Christ - and the number is just countless in all the centuries, in all the generations since the first Christian - if all this vast, uncountable number are called with that same calling, the fullness of Christ, then Christ must be very great indeed.

Yes, and the Christian life must therefore be something very great. If it takes its character, its meaning, and its dimensions from Christ, then the Christian life corresponding to Christ must be a very great thing. It must necessarily be something progressive. No Christian at any time in their experience or history here on this earth can ever say that they have reached that end. It means that the Christian life is one of progress and development. It is all moving toward that ultimate fullness. So we find in the New Testament that the Christian life is set forth in three distinct phases: we ARE Christians, we are BECOMING Christians, and we are GOING TO BE Christians. These three phases are indicated in the original language of the New Testament by three different tenses of the verb.

I believe it was Bishop Handley Moule who was travelling on one occasion, and a Salvation Army lassie entered the same compartment as he. When they had got settled and on the way - he was, I believe, actually a Dean at the time, but of course wearing his canonicals - she interrogated him: 'Sir, are you saved?' Whereupon the kindly old scholar looked at her and said, 'Do you mean...' - and then he quoted the three Greek words. He quoted the word meaning 'I was saved', and then the word meaning 'I am being saved', and then the third word which means 'I shall be saved'. Of course, she was completely bowled over! It was perhaps a bit hard on her, poor lass: of course she did not know what to say; but it led to a very profitable talk about the beginning, the growth and the end of the Christian life.

Well, there it is in the New Testament. We were saved, we are being saved, and we are going to be saved. We were accepted in Christ, we are growing in Christ, we are to be perfected in Christ. Christ, then, is spread over the whole life of the Christian, from its beginning, through its continuation, to its consummation. That is a statement which needs no labouring.

THE FULLNESS OF CHRIST

But what does that mean? What is the "fullness of Christ"? Well, what is the beginning - the simple, elementary nature of Christ, into which we come at the beginning? When we come into Christ, we say we have come into LIFE, we have found LIFE in Christ. The great secret of the first experience is that we have received "the gift of God", which is "eternal life". And, what is more, we know it. There is no doubt about it - we KNOW that life has been given to us.

Then at the beginning we speak of having received our sight, or of having come into the LIGHT. Although we may not be able to define or explain it, everything has become illumined to us, has become altogether new as another world. We know our eyes have been opened. We have come to see; light has broken upon us. We are able to say: "Whereas I was blind, now I see." 'I was in the dark - now it is all light.' Put it how you will, the beginning of the Christian life is just that.

Life, light - and then LIBERTY. One of the great things of the beginning of the Christian life is a wonderful sense of release, of emancipation, of having been set free. It would need a chapter all to itself, this liberty into which Christ brings us, this wonderful setting free. It is a very great reality.

Lastly, when we come into Christ, we come into LOVE, Divine love, and Divine love comes into our hearts.

These are four of the things into which, in an elementary form, we come, and which come into us, right at the beginning. Of course, there is much more that could be said, and there are many other things, but that is enough to provide for the answer to our enquiry. Let us run over them once again.

First of all, LIFE - a new life and a different life. I do not mean now the way we live - that follows, of course - but a new dynamic power in us, which is Divine life. It is a new life, another one altogether, and that life has in it another nature. It belongs to another realm, and has the nature of that other realm. It is the realm of God Himself. I do not mean, of course, that we are now at this point altogether other creatures; but this is the beginning. We are conscious that there is a new nature at work within us, working for certain things and against certain other things - which is something that was never true of us before.

Yes, we have a new and different life - an ENERGY. Life is an energy, is it not? See what life will do. Life really demands difficulty to prove its energy. I remember, some years ago, going down into Cornwall and staying on a farm. This farm had fields on a slope, and one of the fields was just strewn all over with large, white stones. It was the time of the year when seed was in, and nothing was appearing. I said to the farmer, 'Surely you will never get a crop of wheat in that field with all those stones!' 'Don't you make any mistake', he replied. 'I thought that when I first came to this farm, so I cleared them off, and got a very poor crop. So I put them back again, and I got a very much better crop with the stones - much stronger and healthier than I had before.' Life, you see, proves itself by difficulties and opposition. Here is a new life-force, an energy of a different kind, of another kingdom, that is given to us in our new birth. It is different.

LIGHT - a new intelligence, a new understanding, a new clearness about things. Everybody who has had a genuine Christian experience knows that. They see what they could never see before. Up till then, they may have been striving and struggling to see. But now they see, and it is another world that is open before them, just as a new world is given to any person who has been born blind and at some time receives their sight. They are given a world. They have heard about it, talked about it, had it explained to them, but they have never before been able to say, 'Now I see!'

LIBERTY - release - and with the release enlargement. What a large thing the Christian life is! There is something wrong with a Christian life that is small, mean, limited, petty and narrow. The Christian life is a large thing; it is a "land of far distances". With every enlargement, there comes a new inward sense of prospect. Things are ever and ever beyond. The further you go in the Christian life, the more conscious you are of how much more there is. You never exhaust this wonderful sense of prospect and future, of a vast, wide-open door.

LOVE - a new motive power in the life, in the heart. The hallmark of a true Christian life at its very beginning is love. It shows itself in an instantaneous desire to let someone else know all about it, to share the good things into which we have come. It is a great heart overflow to all the world. And it is in its character a selfless love. Self goes out. You do anything, you make any sacrifice, you never consider yourself; this "love of Christ constraineth", in a great care for the things of others, a deep, warm devotion to their interests. It is a new love. We cannot enlarge upon each of these - least of all, perhaps, upon this

wonderful love of God which is shed abroad in our hearts - but you see that these four things alone are there, in an elementary form, right at the beginning.

CHRIST FILLING ALL THINGS

What, then, is the fullness of Christ? It is simply the continuous enlargement and ultimate finality of these very things. The continuous growth of life - the freshness, the dynamic force of God within the life - this motive power - this Divine nature, which is in His life - should never, never come to a standstill. It is intended, according to the eternal purpose, to grow and grow and grow more and more. More life! Let us take this earnestly to heart. To receive eternal life may be a gift once and for all, but if you are at the beginning you have yet to discover how wonderfully full that life is, and how that life can become more and more abundant as you go on. The longer we as Christians live, the more should we be characterized by this mighty life of Christ - "the power of his resurrection", it is called. And the fullness of Christ is the progressive enlargement and development and sum of those very things which came to us, and into which we came, at the beginning; and if we attain unto fullness - which we shall never do here in this life; but we shall ultimately move right into the fullness - it will be the universality of all those things.

Now you can see how vast Christ is, and how vast the Christian life must be. The Scripture speaks of Christ 'filling all things' - "that he might fill all things" (Eph. 4:10). How is Christ going to 'fill all things'? It just means that, when that comes about, all things - and it is a vast, an infinite 'all' - will be full of His life, full of His light, full of His liberty, full of His love, and there will be nothing else. All that Christ is will be expressed in the whole creation. That is the purpose of the Christian life, and we have failed of the purpose if that is not true, in a progressive way, now. If it is not true that those things are increasing in us, we have missed the very object of the Christian life. Yes, if there is not more love, and still more love, and yet again more love and life, and light, and liberty - the very purpose of the Christian life has been missed.

ALL THINGS FILLED INTO CHRIST

Christ filling all things - and all things filled into Christ. Perhaps one of the best illustrations of this is provided by Solomon; indeed, he is in the Old Testament for that very purpose. Everybody knows about king Solomon and his great wisdom. 'The wisdom of Solomon' is the very synonym for wisdom. If anybody shows particular wisdom or acumen, we often dub them 'a little Solomon'.

I saw recently in the paper the following story. A class of boys was being told about the incident of the execution of John the Baptist. You remember that Salome danced before Herod, and he was so pleased that he said, 'What would you like? What is your request? I will give it to you, even to the half of my kingdom.' She went away, and consulted her evil mother, who hated John the Baptist because of what he had said about her evil ways; and the mother counselled the daughter to ask for the head of John the Baptist. When she did so, Herod was very, very distressed, and looked for a way out; but he found none, and because of the oath that he had made, he commanded that the head of John the Baptist should be brought. Here the teacher turned to the class, and said, 'Now, what would you have done if you had been Herod?' And one bright boy chirped up, 'I would have said to the woman, "That belongs to the half of the kingdom that I did not promise!"' And so in the paper the story was headed: 'A Young Solomon'.

That is just by the way. But Solomon is the synonym for vast wisdom. Also of vast wealth: we know of the riches of Solomon. Vast power: for his kingdom reached beyond all the kingdoms that had ever been in Israel. And vast glory: even the Lord Jesus referred to that - it was proverbial. He said: "Even Solomon in all his glory..." And we read that, when the queen of Sheba came to prove for herself all this, her verdict

was: 'The half was never told me! I had heard fabulous stories, but the half was never told!' And Solomon's people were in it - they were in the good of that; and in certain senses it was in them too. Solomon would not have arrogated all this to himself, but it would be seen in the lives and homes of the people. They were in the greatness of Solomon, but the greatness of Solomon was in them also.

Now here, in the New Testament, Jesus says: "...a greater than Solomon is here" (Matt. 12:42). Christ infinitely transcends Solomon, and therefore the people of Christ are in the same measure greater than Solomon's people. His fullness is to be their inheritance: they are to be in it - it is to be in them. The purpose of God is that. What God has purposed is to have a people eventually in great prosperity, great wealth, great spiritual riches, great spiritual glory. We are called, says the Word of God, unto His eternal glory (1 Pet. 5:10). That, briefly and very simply, is the purpose.

THE PRINCIPLES GOVERNING THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

Now, there are principles governing the Christian life. It is exceedingly important that we should recognise this: for, apart from the principles, there can be no realising of the purpose. The principles are basic and governmental to the purpose. We shall never move on in the purpose, progressively, or attain to it finally, except by way of the Divine principles. So, if the purpose lays hold of our hearts, and we respond and say, 'Yes, it is a wonderful thing to be called according to that purpose, and I want to attain to that', then it is necessary to know some of the principles which govern it - principles which are indispensable to the development and realisation of the purpose.

(a) THE CROSS

The first basic principle of the purpose is the Cross - the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Cross has two sides, or operates in two ways. First, outwardly, as to what it means FOR us, and then inwardly, as what it means IN us. These two sides of the Cross occupy a vast amount of the teaching of the New Testament.

The Cross is a work which, on one side, is finished. It is a work fully and finally done: that is, as to our being allowed to come to God, having access - that is the New Testament word - access to God, having union with God and having fellowship with God. All the work for that has been fully finished. We are 'made nigh through the Blood of His Cross'. We have been made one with Him by the Cross. The Cross on that side, for our approach to God, our access to God, our union with God, is a fully accomplished work, and there is nothing more to be done apart from our accepting of it by faith. But there is also the other side to the Cross - what it is to mean IN us. The Cross is to be an abiding power in our lives. It is a principle to be continuously at work in us. On the one side, then, there is what the Cross meant in itself, then and there. On the other side, there is what the Cross requires of us.

What did it mean? Well, all-inclusively and comprehensively, the Cross meant the removal from God's sight of one kind of man. Jesus Christ at one point assumed the capacity of representative of all men, as in God's sight: that is, in sin, under judgment. "Him", says the Scripture, "who knew no sin he made to be sin on our behalf" (2 Cor. 5:21). Again, He was made a curse in our place (Gal. 3:13). That is where we were, where all men were - SIN. We were not only doing sins - we were SIN-FULL in God's sight, under judgment, under condemnation, in rejection. And Jesus at that given point took that place - your place, my place, the place of every man as in God's sight under that rejection - and entered into an experience of all the conscious meaning of that rejection such as you and I have never known, and need never know. To have the slightest taste, the slightest sense, of having been rejected of God is enough to disintegrate the

very soul. If you and I should have any consciousness of being forsaken by God, it would be devastating to our moral being, utterly unbearable. Jesus took the sum of that in full consciousness. It disintegrated Him - His very heart ruptured under it and broke - because He knew and endured in that one awful eternal moment the reality of being forsaken of God, on our behalf. 'My God, Thou hast forsaken Me!' That was done for you and for me. We never need awake in eternity to that, if we will accept what He has done for us.

You see, what He had voluntarily accepted was the setting aside of a particular kind of man. In that awful hour He had voluntarily allowed Himself to take the place of that kind of man. It was God saying, 'I close the door forever to that kind of being.' The Cross means that in Christ's death you and I, as to what we are naturally - men and women by nature - have been set aside. God has in Christ disposed of and removed a kind of being, a degenerate species of creation. He has put it out of the way. In the resurrection of the Lord Jesus that is all done: THAT man has gone. It is not THAT man that is raised from the dead: it is a new man - another. Christ has put off the 'old' man, and now assumes the place of a 'new creation' man.

And there the Heaven is opened. God accepts that Man, and He is installed and instated forever before God, as the type of man that God has ever had in mind. The Cross, on the one side, sets aside a kind of man, and, on the other side, installs and instates another kind of man. "Wherefore", says the Apostle, "if any man is in Christ, there is a new creation: the old things are passed away; behold, they are become new" (2 Cor. 5:17). The Christian life is just that, in principle. The Cross has brought about this - that there is a difference between where we were and how we were and what we were before, in God's sight, and how it is now. In Christ, there is a different man; by faith in Christ there has come about a different creation. In the resurrection of Christ, the old kind of man has been replaced by an altogether new one. Now there arises the necessity for our first of all accepting this position. We shall never get anywhere in Christ, anywhere on the way to the realm of fullness, until we have accepted that position into which God has put us in the death of Christ. In effect He says to us, 'Look here: so far as I am concerned, in yourself you are a dead man, a dead woman. I want you to recognise that, when My Son died, you died in Him, and when He rose, you rose in Him too, and there is now a new creation. Until you do that, you will never get anywhere at all. When you do that, then you are in the position to take your place in the reality of Christ risen.' Sooner or later our growth spiritually will come up against that principle in the form of suffering and discipline.

You see, first of all it is a matter of A POSITION TO BE TAKEN, deliberately taken by faith. This is something that needs constantly to be underlined. It is the basic principle of the Christian life, that we have got to consent to God's verdict upon us as we are by nature. We are not to dissect ourselves and say, 'This is good and this is bad, and this is not so good and this is not so bad.' God says: 'ALL of you has gone in My Son. I do not make distinctions between what you call good and what you call bad. I regard you as altogether under condemnation.' "There is none righteous, no, not one" (Rom. 3:10). "In me, that is, in my flesh, dwelleth no good thing" (Rom. 7:18).

Yes, that is basic, and it is vital that we should get hold of this fundamental principle of the Christian life. Many Christians do not make any progress at all, development and growth is stayed and arrested, because they have not got that basic matter settled. They are still trying to make something of the person, the self, the nature, that God says He will never entertain at all. They are still thinking that they can be something in themselves, and trying to be something in themselves. They have never accepted this utter, ultimate position. God says, 'I have put you in a grave with My Son, and that was the end of that. Now everything has got to be of another kind, from another source altogether. It must all come from Christ

risen, and not from you at all.'

That is the key to fullness. It opens up the way, throws wide open the doors. When you get that really settled and by faith take that position, there is no limit to what can be done in the Christian life. But then, when once the position, the utter position, has been taken and accepted, acknowledged, received by faith, then the other side begins - the application of the principle. We accept that ultimate position as a basis and recognise it as God's own verdict, and then the principle of the Cross begins to work in us. Yes, the tenses again, that we had earlier, are: firstly PAST - we were crucified with Christ (Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20). Then PRESENT - Paul says: "Always bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life also of Jesus may be manifested in our body" (2 Cor. 4:10); and again: "I die daily" (1 Cor. 15:31). And lastly FUTURE - his aspiration was: "that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable to his death" (Phil. 3:10).

Here is the principle at work. It was accepted in a definite act, but now it is being applied as an active thing in the life, on the one side bringing to an actual reality our death with Christ, and correspondingly, on the other side, bringing into our experience our life-union with Christ. As the death works, so the life works. This is just the meaning of the Christian life. What is God doing with us? Why all this trouble, all this difficulty, all this discipline - this chastening, this hard way, this difficult school? Why all this? 'I thought the Christian life was going to be one continuous song and picnic and joy-ride!' You find that it is not. It does not mean that joy disappears, but it does mean that we come into a lot of difficulties and into what, to that 'old man' of ours, is a very difficult way. What is the meaning?

Ah, God is applying the principle - getting the old man out of the way and making way for the new. Is it not true of a Christian, a true Christian, as differing from any other person, that suffering produces beauty, suffering produces the fruit, the nature, of Christ; suffering just brings out what Christ is? In others, so often, suffering brings out bitterness, resentment. Some of the most difficult people that I have ever met and tried to help have been people who, because of some great adversity in their lives, have turned against God, become bitter, sour. Suffering has done that. But that is not what happens to a Christian. The marvel of the Christian, the miracle of the Christian life, is just this, that you can find some dear children of God, in lifelong suffering and agony, either of body or of circumstances, who are just wonderfully radiant. You go in where they are, and it is the peace of God. The hymns they sing are hymns about the love of God. Such are their favourite hymns, and yet, if they sang at all, you would think, naturally speaking, it would not be about that. I have clearly in mind certain outstanding instances of such people, in my own experience.

What is it all for? Why, the principle of the Cross is at work, clearing the ground for Christ, for this new creation life, making way for the fullness of Christ. That is the first principle.

(b) RELATEDNESS

The second principle can only be mentioned briefly before we close. This is a very important principle indeed. It is that of relatedness. You see, no individual Christian, and no number of Christians just as separate isolated individuals, can come to the fullness of Christ. Indeed, if you think about it, it goes without saying. If Christ is as big as we have said, how can any one individual come to that? It is nonsense to suggest it. It would be arrogance to think it. It will require a vast, vast multitude to come to that; but they will never come to it as a multitude or congregation of INDIVIDUALS.

You see, the great conception that is given to us in the New Testament is of the aggregate of Christians as the Body of Christ. You have only to think for a moment about your body, and you know quite well that no one member of your body will grow if detached from the others. It requires not only all the other members, but all the members united, to make one body. There can be no development, either of any member or members, or of the body as a whole, without articulation. I believe that one of the first things that a student of medicine has to face is a box of bones - a box of bones is handed to him. It is all the bones of all the members of a human body. 'Now then, put those bones together and make up a skeleton!' That is the first lesson. And the very first lesson of spiritual fullness and growth is the articulation of Christians, the recognition of the fact that we belong to one another.

The second lesson is that we cannot get on without one another. Our spiritual life depends upon our relatedness with one another, and the maintenance of that adjustment one to another is the secret of spiritual growth. You will find that if Satan can carry out his master-stroke of separating Christians, he has effected their spiritual arrest. It is always like that. That is why he is after it. Divisions are the masterpiece of the Devil, who is set against God's ultimate purpose - the fullness of Christ. If we would only look at our divisions - not only the larger ones, but the little ones, between us and somebody else - in the light of how it first of all affects our or their spiritual growth, and then relates to the larger interests of Christ's increase, we should have a motive for getting rid of those divisions, healing those quarrels, and adjusting our relationships. Relatedness is vital to growth. It is first of all articulation, member to member, and then it is mutuality of life, dependence and interdependence, the recognition of the fact that we must have one another, that our very spiritual life depends upon it. Fellowship is essential, is indispensable. It is a principle of growth. You will be greater or smaller in your measure of Christ according to your recognition and observance of that principle.

But, mark you, it is not artificial, it is not institutional, it is not something that we organize: it is ORGANIC - it is by life and by love. It is not from the outside, by our arranging it, deciding to have it and fixing it up; it comes from the inside - it comes from Christ within. Paul put his finger upon that very thing in the church in Corinth, when he found rival circles there. One circle centred in himself, saying, 'We are of Paul'. Another circle centred in Apollos - 'We are of Apollos.' Another circle centred in Peter - 'We are of Peter'; and so on. His appeal to them was this: "Is Christ divided?" (1 Cor. 1:13). Of course, the answer is, 'No, you cannot divide Christ.' 'Then if Christ is in you and governs, this is all a contradiction to Christ, this is all not Christ!'

No wonder, then, that we find a poor, mean, miserable measure of spiritual life at Corinth at that time. Thank God, we have another side to the story later on. They evidently got over it, on the basis, the principle, of the Cross. Paul's second letter to them gives a very different picture of the Corinthian church. But Christ cannot be divided, and all divisions, from individual differences between two or more Christians, right up to the great divisions between major Christian groups, are a contradiction of Christ, and no wonder there is spiritual poverty, weakness, ineffectiveness, and lack of registration and impact upon this world. The Devil has triumphed there. We must take note of that. It is a great battle in this matter of fellowship, for the very reason that all the evil forces are set against it. Paul says that this is a matter about which we have to be very diligent: "giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph. 4:3).

(c) PURITY OF HEART

I close by just mentioning a third principle, without enlarging upon it. It is the principle of purity of heart. You and I will not grow at all with the increase of Christ, toward the fullness of Christ, unless we maintain a very pure spirit. By that I mean an open heart: one that is free from prejudice, free from suspicion; a readiness to receive, an ability to adjust; no final closure, even though we may have been brought up in a certain way. If the Lord has 'more light and truth to break forth from His Word', we are open to it; we have not come to a final position that we know it all, we have got it all, we are in it all. A pure spirit means an open heart, a ready spontaneity of response to every bit of light that God gives; obedience instant, without argument. Upon this hangs very much more than we may imagine.

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