

The Kingdom and the Church

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Kingdom of God is the sovereign rule of God, and the Church is the embodiment of that rule, the fruit of its activity, and the vessel of God's authority.

Scripture: Matthew 3:1, Matthew 16:18-19, Matthew 18:17, Acts 2:36, Acts 3:6, Ephesians 1:4, Philippians 2:8, 1 Peter 1:1, Revelation 21:24

Topics: "Church Governance", "Kingdom Of God"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks delves into the significance of the Church and the Kingdom in the Gospel of Matthew. He explores the difference and connection between the two, emphasizing that while they are distinct, they are intertwined as cause and effect. The Church is portrayed as the embodiment of the triumph of God's sovereign rule, gathering believers as the fruit of the Kingdom's activity. Additionally, the Church is depicted as the seat through which God's sovereign rule is centered and mediated, expressing the divine and heavenly order and character.

Transcript

"In those days cometh John the Baptist, preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, saying, Repent ye, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (Matthew 3:1,2).

"I... say unto thee, that I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18).

"And if he refuse to hear them, tell it unto the church" (Matthew 18:17).

It is a very significant fact that it is in the Gospel by Matthew, which is essentially the Gospel of the Kingdom, that the Church is first brought into view in the New Testament.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE KINGDOM AND THE CHURCH

The first question which arises is as to what the difference is between the Kingdom and the Church. What is the difference? Are they two things, or one? The attempt has been made, by one considerable body of teaching, to prove that they are two different things entirely: that the Kingdom is one thing, belonging to one age, that it is now in this dispensation in suspense, but that it will come in with the restoration of the Jews in the next dispensation, the present dispensation being that of the Church. If you want to believe that, you will have to do a lot of juggling with the Scriptures - as has been done. As far as I can see, that

system of truth is absolutely unsupported by the Scripture itself. However, I do not want to introduce a controversial element or source of confusion. I am simply saying that this is a question that we must face.

What is the difference? Are they two things? The answer is really Yes and No. They are not the same thing, and yet they are. That does not help you very much, I know, but we must go on to explain.

The sovereign rule of God and of the heavens, which has come to be called the Kingdom, is, in the first place, as we explained earlier, an announcement, a proclamation, a declaration, of a Divine fact: namely, that the sovereignty of God has been established in and through His Son Jesus Christ IN THIS DISPENSATION, in a new and immediate way. That fact was proclaimed for the first time, in the power of the Holy Spirit, on the day of Pentecost. God had made Him Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). From that time onward, the note was made to ring out through the nations in ever-widening circles - Jesus Christ is Lord! That is the first phase of the sovereign rule or the Kingdom - a proclamation or an announcement.

Then, as we saw, it is an activity. Something is going on. When it is announced, when the proclamation is made, something begins to happen. Heaven is moved, and believing souls are saved. Hell is roused, and the heralds are persecuted. It is an activity - not just a doctrine, a truth, a theory. This sovereign rule or Kingdom is a mighty energy. And so, from a presenting of a fact, it becomes the demanding of an answer, and thereby a sifting and sorting of mankind into two categories, into one of two kingdoms.

We saw, further, how comprehensive is this rule, spreading itself sovereignly over everything, taking up everything into its sovereignty. Even the antagonisms and oppositions are taken hold of by this sovereignty, and made to serve the end which they were intended to defeat. It is all-comprehending, knowing all the course of things through history, as those parables make so clear. That last parable in Matthew 13 brings us right to the end of the age, and from the first - the sowing of the seed, the word of the Kingdom - through all the phases and stages and variations, and everything that arises, to the last, the end of the age, we see that this sovereign rule has comprehended the whole, foreseen and foretold exactly what would happen and how things would develop, and has laid hold of all; so that at the last the sovereign rule is triumphant. That is the essential meaning of the 'Kingdom'.

THE CHURCH AND THE FRUIT OF THE KINGDOM

What is the Church? Well, the operation, the activity, of the sovereign rule works like this. The effect of the challenge and demand and sifting out, brought about by the proclamation, is that all along certain people are found who make the right reaction and response, and are thus brought right into the meaning of that sovereign rule: people, that is to say, who first acknowledge, and then themselves declare, that Jesus Christ is Lord. The sovereign rule has done its work so far, and then the fruit of that sovereign activity in the nations is gathered into a body called the Church. The Church becomes the vessel, the repository, of the work of the sovereign government of God. It gathers into itself as a vessel the fruit of the sovereign activity: so that the Kingdom leads to the Church, and the Church is the result, the embodiment, of the Kingdom.

It is interesting to note in Matthew's Gospel how very clear that is, if we can only see it. The last parable of the seven in chapter 13, the parable of the drag-net, brings us, as I have said, to the end of the age: the angels are sent forth, and the good are gathered into vessels, but the bad are cast away. Now turn over to chapter 24, verse 31, and here you find that the Lord is definitely answering that part of the disciples' question - "What shall be the end of the age?" (v. 3). "He shall send forth his angels... and they shall gather together his elect". Now, chapter 13 is the casting away of the bad fish; chapter 24 is the gathering

of the good; and between the two, in chapters 16 and 18, we find the Church introduced.

Is that clear? The work of the Kingdom, the activity of the Kingdom, is the searching out, finding out, challenging, receiving, gathering, bringing into the Church. Strange that nothing is said about the Church coming into existence, other than - "I will build my church"! Nothing is said about Church teaching at all. It is simply introduced, almost as though it were a recognised thing, and then the final picture is of the elect being gathered. The Church is the fruit and sum of that first activity of the sovereign rule of God. And the Church is the 'elect', the 'chosen'. Peter and Paul speak of the Church in this very language. "Elect... according to the foreknowledge of God the Father" (1 Peter 1:1,2). And "he chose us in him before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4).

I trust that we are clear now that the Church and the Kingdom are not two things, and yet they are. They are not the same thing, and yet they are. If you like, they are cause and effect. They are the complement of each other. There is a sense in which the sovereign rule is a 'bigger' thing than the Church - that is, if you will use the word 'bigger' in the sense of dimensions and not intrinsic value. It is so comprehensive. As we have seen, it takes up anything - almost everything - even the work of the Devil, the enemy who sowed his children amongst the children of God. This sovereign rule is such an expansive and wonderful thing. But then it focuses down upon certain results, and gathers them into a concrete entity called the Body of Christ. So that we have part and counterpart: they are one, and yet they are not one.

The Church, then, is the embodiment of the triumph of His rule. That is not only a statement of fact or of truth - it is a glorious testimony. It says what the Church is in the thought of God, but it also says what the Church ought to be in itself - the very embodiment of the triumph of the sovereign rule of God. Of course, it is so, if it is the Church in reality at all. Every one of us, if we really are in the Church and of the Church, according to New Testament conception, is an embodiment and an expression of the triumph of His sovereign rule. You can use another phrase, if you like, which only defines that - sovereign grace, for His rule in this dispensation is the rule of grace. We are here by the triumph of sovereign grace, and we shall remain here on that ground alone, and at last we shall be found in that elect company simply because of the triumph of His sovereign rule through grace. That is the Church as the fruit of the Kingdom.

SOVEREIGN ACTIVITY IN RELATION TO THE WORD

Next, the Church is the embodiment of the sovereign activity in relation to the word of the Kingdom, as given by the Sower. While there is a large proportion of failure and disappointment, there is the thirtyfold, the sixtyfold and the hundredfold, and the Church takes that in. The Church is found to be composed of the triumph of the word of the Kingdom. Some of us are only 'thirtyfold' results, some a bit more, some perhaps may be even a hundredfold. At any rate, something has happened, and the Lord has got something in us. We want Him to have all that He can have. But that is just what the Church is - it is the thirtyfold, sixtyfold, hundredfold result of the word of the Kingdom. It is the wheat as over against the tares, the children of the Kingdom as over against the children of the Devil. We thank God that we can truly claim to be His children.

Again, the Church is the embodiment of the truth of unleavened bread. It 'keeps the feast' with 'unleavened bread' (1 Cor. 5:8). Spiritually that means that the leaven has been purged out. Praise God that all the corrupting, disintegrating work of sin and of the world has been dealt with.

The Church takes up the inner principle of the tree - the great, abnormal, 'freak' tree, as we called it - a mustard seed growing into a great tree, which it never does normally and naturally. It must be something

absolutely abnormal to do it. But, over against that, the Church is something spiritually normal and healthy. There is nothing freakish about it. The Lord deliver us from all that is abnormal and all that is freakish. Ask the Lord to save you from being freakish! The Church is the true thing, and not the false thing like that great tree.

The Church is also the vessel of the good fish. Perhaps you do not like to think of yourself as a fish! But that is what the Church is. We may not think we are good fish - we may feel we are very poor fish! - nevertheless we are different; there is a difference.

And to crown it all, the Church is the "pearl of great price", and the "treasure hidden in the field".

All this, mark you, is within the compass of the teaching about the Kingdom; it all comes in the same chapter on the mysteries or parables of the Kingdom. They all issue in something positive, as over against something either negative or wrong; and the Church comes in and takes up all that is positive and right as the fruit of the word of the Kingdom. The Church then becomes the chosen, the elect, the holy nation, to whom this 'Kingdom', in this sense, is given. I will not enlarge upon that now; you will recall the Scriptures which I have cited.

THE SEAT OF THE SOVEREIGN RULE

But the Church is not only the embodiment of the fruit and triumph of the sovereign rule - it is that in which the immediate power of that rule is centred and then mediated. The sovereign rule of God, of Heaven, is centred in the Church. That is the first great truth about the Church in those early days, as it first comes into being. If you want to know where to find this sovereign rule, government, dominion, authority, of God and of Heaven, you will find it in the Church. There it is in Jerusalem, there it is in Antioch; there it is going everywhere. God has put authority and heavenly power in the Church in a peculiar way.

Oh, that the Church were alive to the meaning of its existence, in this sense - alive to the great deposit with which it has been entrusted, as the very vessel of this sovereign operation, this mighty sovereign activity and rule of God. That deposit is there. When things have been as they should be, that is exactly what has been found in the Church. There were times when unbelievers coming in fell down on their faces, and said, 'God is in the midst of you' (1 Cor. 14:24,25). While joyous, while gladsome, while very blessed in other respects, there ought yet to be something very awful about the Church. "Of the rest durst no man join himself to them" (Acts 5:13). Oh that that forbidding of Divine holiness might be found in the Church! The Church is the seat of this JUDICIAL activity of the Divine sovereignty. So it should be.

THE SOVEREIGN RULE MEDIATED THROUGH THE CHURCH

But then this sovereignty is mediated through the Church. It goes out and says: "In the name of Jesus of Nazareth..." (Acts 3:6). 'In the NAME of Jesus of Nazareth, I command you, I say unto you...' Here is the authority mediated, the Kingdom - poor word again - the sovereign rule, centred in and operating through the Church. That is how it ought to be. The authority of Jesus Christ is in the Church and should be exercised by the Church. Matthew 16 makes that quite clear. "I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Matt. 16:19). If that is not authority in Heaven and earth, what is? But it is the authority of Him to whom it was given (Matt. 28:18) through His mighty victory.

THE EXPRESSION OF THE DIVINE AND HEAVENLY ORDER

The Church is, further, that in which the character of the Divine and heavenly order and rule is expressed. If the Kingdom of God and of Heaven has, as one of its essential aspects and components, the nature of Him that rules, then this is not just official, this is not just ecclesiastical - this is spiritual and moral in its very nature. At this point we ought to extend our meditations and go back to those three mighty chapters of Matthew's Gospel, embracing what is called 'the sermon on the mount'; for there is a revolution in ideas there. The whole conception of power is changed. Virtue is pre-eminent, character is predominant. The true values are shown to lie in what you ARE, not in that which is official and organized. "Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit..." "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom..."

That opens a very large field, which we cannot touch now. But it is all gathered into this, that the Kingdom is, from one standpoint, the expression of the nature, of the character, of Him who is sovereign, and that that is to be found in the Church. We may think of the Kingdom as a great, general thing, operating and active in the whole world, irrespective of anything and everything that is contrary to it; but it is not going to stop there. It is going to work until it has produced an expression of its own character; it will work, down and down until it has that nucleus that expresses the character of Him who is on the throne. And it is in the Church that the Divine and heavenly nature is found, and it is that nature that is sovereign.

There is perhaps no greater force operating from Heaven than the force of meekness. "He humbled himself, becoming obedient..." (Phil. 2:8); but the whole kingdom of Satan was shattered along that line. Men do not like that at all. Here is the revolution. But, you see, it is in the Church that this tremendous power is to be found - this being poor in spirit, this meekness, this being persecuted for righteousness' sake, and all the rest. But therein is power, therein is authority. It is very often not until you get down on your knees, utterly broken as to your own pride, that you get through to God in absolute victory. To be emptied of all self is the way of power, the way of God, the way of Heaven. That is the essence of the Kingdom or sovereignty, and that is all to be taken up by the Church.

THE CHURCH JOINT-HEIR WITH CHRIST

Just one brief word in conclusion. The Church is the joint-heir with Christ of the inheritance, the universal rule, in the ages to come. We know this on the authority of Scripture. The Church is heir to the throne of the world to come - to the administrative place with the Lord Jesus over all that will be extra to itself. For a city presupposes a country, a metropolis presupposes a wider range. The City in the midst of the nations means that government over the nations is THERE, and at the end of the book of the Revelation (21:24, 22:2) that is where the whole matter issues.

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