

The Local Expression of the Church

by T. Austin-Sparks

A true local expression of the Church is essential for the fulfillment of God's purposes, and it should be characterized by ministering to others, providing a refuge and protection, and being a Bible School for systematic instruction.

Scripture: Isaiah 58:10, Matthew 28:19-20, Acts 19:10, Romans 14:7, 1 Corinthians 12:12-27, Galatians 6:2, Ephesians 4:16, 1 Thessalonians 1:8, Hebrews 10:24-25, Revelation 2 - 3

Topics: "Community in Christ", "Local Church"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the critical role of local expressions of the Church, highlighting their significance in the New Testament and the spiritual warfare against them by evil forces. He outlines the necessity for local churches to be vibrant, outward-focused communities that not only nurture their members but also extend their influence beyond their immediate surroundings. The preacher stresses that a true local church should be a refuge, provide personal ministries, and serve as a training ground for believers, fostering cooperation and collective growth. He warns against isolation and individualism, advocating for a church life that embodies the teachings of Christ and the work of the Cross. Ultimately, the local church is portrayed as a vital instrument in God's plan, essential for the health of the universal Church.

Transcript

Before leaving our consideration of the Church, I feel strongly that I should say a few things of vital importance as to a true local expression of the Church. I know only too well how difficult it is to find or secure any such TRUE expression, but that is no reason why we should abandon the whole matter: rather is it a pointer to its value, for history and experience have shown that this is one thing that is of very great account where the adversary of Christ is concerned. To prevent or destroy such expressions has always been a major concern of the powers of evil. The true Church, universal and local, is a very great menace to the kingdom of Satan. This we have emphasised in earlier chapters. But let us summarise:

(1) The importance of the Church in local expressions

We must first remind ourselves that a solid block of the New Testament was written specifically to local churches; which churches had been the first result of apostolic ministry. That ministry, and all the suffering involved, had been vindicated in local corporate bodies of believers. It was for those churches that the apostles travailed, laboured, prayed and fought. The bulk of the New Testament had its supreme concern

for such assemblies which, themselves, had known great sufferings in their very birth, and were in "a great fight of affliction" for their continuance and survival.

Then we must remember that the Lord's own personal concern for, and evaluation of local churches is made very evident by His direct messages to the seven churches in Asia with which the book of finalities (Revelation) commences. There is no mistaking the importance to the exalted Lord of local churches when we read those messages, the focal point of which is a clause in one of them "These things saith the Son of God." The Psalmist would say: "Selah" - "think of that!"

(2) This importance is to be seen in the specific values of a local assembly, when rightly functioning

(a) Here the principle that "No man liveth unto himself, and no man dieth unto himself" (Romans 14:7) is enunciated in relation to the local church in the messages to the churches in Asia. It is said of the church in Ephesus that through them "all they which be in Asia heard the word of the Lord" (Acts 19:10 - see 1 Thessalonians 1:8). It should be impossible for a local assembly of God's people to exist without it being known over an area far greater than its own locality. A living company will, sooner or later, be known abroad for what it has of the Lord.

(b) To enlarge on this, a local church should have, not only enough spiritual bread for itself, but basketfuls over to spare, and many beyond its borders should be receiving enrichment from its spiritual wealth. Is this not so very evident in history? Have not the Lord's people been feeding down the ages unto this day upon the bread ministered to and through those New Testament churches? Is it not true that multitudes have been fed, and are still being fed by the food ministered in local churches in many places in the last century? So the Lord would have it. The church which only ministers to itself and does not do so to the Church at large is committing a sin against the trust of life; it is a cul-de-sac, not a highway. Of course, it is particularly important that the ministry in a local church is truly anointed ministry. Not by man's appointment, selection or decision from either side. Not by studied-up and made-up addresses, but by illumination and inspiration as through an open heaven. Not just keeping something going as a MUST, but by revelation of Jesus Christ. It must be evident to all that those leading and ministering are under a genuine burden from the Lord, and the evidence is LIFE!

(c) The local church should, and can be a refuge, a covering, a protection to its own members. One of Satan's master-tactics is to isolate believers and then knock them out. This can be done by unwise and independent action, choices, movements, uncounselled decisions. The church by its prayers, and counsel, and fellowship is a Divine provision against the tragedies which lie in the way of independence and isolation. Cooperation and coordination in the physical body are a provision and a law against many diseases. So it is in the spiritual body corporate.

(d) The local church should provide personal ministries to the Lord's people, and to the unsaved near and far, and it should provide an encompassing safeguard and support for the fulfilment of such ministries. Those who go forth in the church's ministry should know that they are being upheld and stood with by those from amongst whom they have gone. Indeed, they should go as sent forth by the church!

The lack and absence of these characteristics in local companies is the cause of much weakness in the Church universal.

(e) Finally, a local church rightly functioning is a wonderful provision for the training of its members for service. Training is so largely a matter of being able to work corporately. How to live and work with others,

and to sink individualism into fellowship, is a real part of the discipline which makes a fruitful ministry!

There is a real danger in departmentalism; the separation into isolated groups, so that these groups do not come into the corporate life and function of the church. It is possible to have groups associated with a local church which really have no true CHURCH life. This means weakness and loss. Moreover, the local church should be its own Bible School, for systematic instruction in the Word of God.

Careful reading of the Bible, especially the New Testament, will show that what we have said above is all there as exhortation, admonition, warning, instruction, and example.

Were I to add one more vital and ALL-INCLUSIVE thing, I would say that the absolute essential to such churches is a real work of the Cross in everyone concerned.

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