

The Outcome of Departure From a Heavenly Vision

by T. Austin-Sparks

The governing law of God's purpose for the Church is heavenliness, and the Church's nature is spiritual oneness, which is heavenliness.

Scripture: John 17:21, John 18:36, John 20:21, Ephesians 2:19

Topics: "Heavenly Vision", "Spiritual Oneness"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the critical importance of maintaining a heavenly vision for the Church, contrasting the heavenliness of Christ with the earthbound nature of Jerusalem and Judaism. He illustrates how Jerusalem's decline was linked to its earthly focus, leading to spiritual blindness and rejection of Christ, who embodied everything heavenly. The sermon warns against the dangers of jealousy, prejudice, and division within the Church, which reflect a departure from its true heavenly nature. Sparks calls for spiritual oneness among believers, asserting that true unity is essential for the Church to fulfill its divine purpose and resist worldly influences. He concludes by highlighting the necessity of the Holy Spirit's dominion in the Church to maintain its heavenly identity and mission.

Transcript

We have been seeking to bring into view that essential heavenliness of the Church which is a basic and governing law of God's purpose for her. This we have seen to be a factor of tremendous importance in God's dealings with Jerusalem. The more we read and meditate upon the matter, the more we see that this lies behind Jerusalem's history. Jerusalem and Palestine present for us a solid block of evidence on this matter. When we pass our eye over the Old Testament, we see that Jerusalem's coming into position, her ascendancy or her revival, always related to those elements which speak of heavenliness, just as, on the contrary, her loss of place, of power, of glory, was due to earthly and worldly elements getting the upper hand.

Jerusalem reached her supreme crisis, when the Lord Jesus came into her midst. It was then that two things in an outstanding way marked the crisis of her history; the first, the heavenliness of His Own Person and life, ministry and mission; the second, the earthliness of Judea's vision, interests, and associations. This contrast is one of the most outstanding elements of the Gospels. Never was Jerusalem's earthliness, earthboundness, more apparent, more conspicuous, than when the Lord was in her midst. He brought

heaven in His Own Person. He was the embodiment of everything heavenly, and by reason of His presence the opposite state was dragged out into the light and made unmistakably clear.

The Heavenliness of Christ and His Own.

As to the first of these two things, the heavenliness of His Person, life, ministry and mission, John's Gospel more than any other brings it into view. We know that the Gospel by John is mainly concerned with matters within the compass of Judaism, and we know that in that Gospel Jerusalem figures very largely, and in a special, intensive way. Against that fact we see in this Gospel the heavenliness of Christ, as that which represents Him more particularly than anything else. Then, so far as His Own people are concerned, that Gospel makes the spiritual life of the believer a heavenly thing at every point. That is to say, the spiritual life of the believer is seen there to have its beginning in heaven; he is born anew, or from above. That life is seen to be sustained from heaven. All the relationships of that life are seen to be heavenly. In that Gospel the Lord takes pains to woo His own from this world, and allows the shadow, if it must be so termed, of His going, to fall very heavily upon them, until their hearts are much troubled and distressed by what He says about His leaving them and going to the Father within a little while. All this, however, is with the definite and deliberate purpose of showing, firstly, that their life is to be a heavenly life, their hope a heavenly hope, not an earthly one - for their trouble of heart was largely due to disappointment as to their worldly expectations in relation to Himself - and He carries them away from the world, from the earth, and fastens their hope upon Himself in glory. That is to say, their's becomes a heavenly hope and not an earthly one. Their service is also set forth as a heavenly service. "As the Father hath sent me, even so send I you" (John 20:21), making their commission a heavenly one upon a heavenly basis, and settling it for all time that the nature of His Own mission here was equally the nature of theirs, a heavenly mission.

We know how all that is gathered up into one heart cry in chapter 17, and how repeatedly in that prayer the statements are positively made concerning both Himself and them, that they are not of this world. His prayer moreover was that they should be kept, while in the world, from the world, and from the Evil One, as the one who governs the evil world. The heavenliness of Christ and His own is brought very clearly into view right in the midst of Judaism at its official headquarters in Jerusalem, and it was on that ground that the earthly Jerusalem reached its supreme crisis.

The Earthboundness of Judaism.

As to the second thing, that is, the earthboundness of Judaism in all its aspects, there is no doubt that this was the background and the cause of its rejection of Christ, and John's Gospel brings that also very clearly before us. That earthboundness of theirs, the grip of historic tradition upon their minds, resulted in spiritual blindness to all that was heavenly. This became manifest, as blindness always is manifested, in various ways. The Gospel by John gives us a clear unveiling of the out-working of that spiritual blindness in jealousy, envy, prejudice, hatred, smallness and pettiness, suspicion, passion. These all run riot in the Gospel by John, and the Jews are seen in a very bad light there. And when you reflect upon that in connection with this dominating feature, the heavenliness of everything in relation to Christ, you see how utterly blind they were to all that was really heavenly. That blindness, working out in all these ways, led that nation to a full and final rejection of Him, and Jerusalem became the centre, and the seat, and the focal point of that intensified religious earthliness in its out-working.

It may be well for us to remind ourselves at this point, that we are having to do with the Church. You and I are supremely interested in the Church. Our great concern is the Church, which is His Body. And that being so, you and I are very deeply exercised, or should be, to know the nature of the Church, what it is that spiritually constitutes the true Church. If these things are true about the earthly Jerusalem, and stand at length in such vivid contrast to the heavenly Christ and the heavenly Church, they lead us to see quite clearly that jealousy, envy, prejudice, pettiness, suspicion, passion, hatred, and such like things, are marks of spiritual blindness. At very best they are marks of spiritual shortsightedness. Conversely, that means that spiritual vision and spiritual revelation should always work out to the absence of such things as jealousy, and envy, suspicion, and prejudice. It is a contradiction to say that we have heavenly light, revelation, that the heavenly Christ has broken upon our hearts, and to have any of these things. That in which they are found is not the heavenly Church.

The state to which we have just referred, obtaining in the earthly Jerusalem in the days of Christ, has been the state of that Jerusalem and of Judaism ever since, and is their state today. In Christ risen from the dead two things can be noted: (1) He did not again appear to Jerusalem nor to official Judaism; (2) He took the Church away from the earth spiritually, and centred it in Himself in heaven. But then history began to develop upon two planes, and along two lines, a true and a false; firstly, the Church as a spiritual and heavenly thing, developing under the direct government and control of the heavenly Holy Spirit; that is, its entire management became a thing as out from heaven; secondly, a false expression of Christianity as an earthly and man-governed system. Along these two lines history moved after the resurrection of Christ. Very soon in the Apostolic age this point of departure could be recognised.

The Jerusalem beneath has from very early in this dispensation become the seat of the most intensified expression of this false idea, this false conception of the Church. Palestine itself has since Christ's day seen the greatest outrages on the heavenly conception of the Church. We concluded our last section of this meditation with a citation from the history of Islam's conquest of Christianity, with this focal point in Palestine, and we saw then how that Islam triumphed over Christianity because of the corruption of Christianity, evidenced by these very things of which we have spoken; divisions, warrings, jealousies, factions amongst Christians. And Islam as a solid body, presenting a solid front, knowing nothing of such factions and divisions, was able to overwhelm that divided thing, that schismatic thing, that internally disintegrated thing; and that overwhelming had its seat in this very country, around this very city of which we are speaking. That in itself is a very forceful lesson; that the subjugation of the earthly Jerusalem, being the result of weakness produced by spiritual division, points to the absolute necessity for the Church's oneness in spirit as the heavenly Jerusalem, if she is really to rise to her place of universal supremacy. We know how very much is connected in the New Testament with that truth. Oh, if it is true that the Lord Jesus was moving out of this world, and taking His Church spiritually with Him, recognising that Jerusalem's undoing was coming because of these unhappy and unholy conditions, how essential it was that He should pray, "that they may all be one" (John 17:21). Error, whether it be Islam or any other error, ancient or modern, known or something quite new, will always gain its advantage by the spiritual weakness produced by division amongst the Lord's people. Such things are only kept at bay as the people of God stand together in spiritual oneness.

We said earlier that the history of Jerusalem presents to us a solid block of evidence, that the governing law of God's Jerusalem is heavenliness, and heavenliness is most certainly spiritual oneness, and spiritual oneness is heavenliness. To put that in another way, immediately you and I come down to earthly considerations, earthly levels of things, our oneness is bound to be assailed, to be broken, and therefore

God's Own thought for His people is set on one side.

The Earthboundness of Christendom.

Not only is this seen so clearly in the triumph of Islam over Christianity, but one other page of history affords very strong evidence and very clear illustration. We refer to the history of the Crusades. Lasting a hundred years, they are really the story of one of the most disgraceful happenings in the history of Christianity, destined, of course, to fail, as indeed they did. As children we were primed with the heroics and the romance of the Crusades, of Richard Coeur de Lion, and such like. But since we have grown up, we have read the story for ourselves, and all our childish glamour has disappeared, and the more we come to understand things from God's standpoint, the more we blush with shame as we look back upon that page in the history of Christianity, when mighty armies were gathered and lives slaughtered wholesale, desolation and carnage brought about in the name of the Church, to try to recapture Palestine for Christianity. No! That is not the heavenly way of doing things. Our warfare is not with flesh and blood, and the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but spiritual. "My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight..." (John 18:36). These are bed-rock laws of the heavenly Jerusalem. Palestine today is a nauseating spectacle. Every place connected in any special way with Christ's earthly life is marked by something which is more than a tragic misrepresentation of Christianity, a shameful misrepresentation is nearer the truth, something called a church in which rivalries run so high that even soldiers have to be kept, either on the premises or in the vicinity, for safety's sake amongst the Christians.

I expect many of you have been reading Morton's book, In the steps of the Master. I will give you one or two fragments from it, to illustrate what I mean. He is speaking here of his visit to Jerusalem, to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. This is what he says:-

"The church gives one an overwhelming impression of darkness and decay. There were passages so dark that I had to strike matches to find my way. And the decay everywhere of stone, of wood, and of iron was fantastic. I saw pictures that were rotting on their canvases, and I even saw canvases still framed, that were bleached white: the last fragments of paint had peeled off, but they were still in position. There were ominous cracks and fissures in stone and marble. I thought how odd it is that extreme devotion can have exactly the same effect as extreme neglect. The Church of the Holy Sepulchre wears its air of shabby decay for the simple reason that the re-hanging of a picture, the repair of a stone, and even the mending of a window, assume such gigantic importance in the eyes of the communities, that they provoke a situation capable of indefinite postponement.... Art and vulgarity stand side by side. A priceless chalice, the gift of an emperor, stands next to something tawdry and tinsely that might have been pulled from a Christmas tree. And hundreds of ikons, glimmering in old gold, receive candle drippings on the stiff Byzantine figures of saint and king.

"The Greek monks swing their censers towards the blaze of candle-light, and the blue clouds of their incense spurt out to hang about the ikons and the gilded screens. The worshippers, kneeling on the marble floors, seem to be prostrate before a series of exotic jewellers' shops.....

"This was the hill of the Crucifixion: Calvary, the holiest place on earth. I looked round, hoping to be able to detect some sign of its former aspect, but that has been obliterated for ever beneath the suffocating trappings of piety. The chapel before which I was kneeling was the Chapel of the Raising of the Cross, the chapel next to it was the Chapel of the Nailing to the Cross."

Turning to his visit to Bethlehem he speaks of his entering the Church of the Nativity, and of this he says:

"The church is built above a cave which was recognised as the birthplace of Jesus Christ....

"Fifty-three silver lamps lighten the gloom of the underground cavern. It is a small cave about fourteen yards long and four yards wide. Its walls are covered with tapestry that reeks of stale incense. If you draw this tapestry aside, you see that the walls are the rough, smoke-blackened walls of a cave. Gold, silver, and tinsel ornaments gleam in the pale glow of the fifty-three lamps....

"This church, like the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, suffers from divided ownership. It is in the hands of the Latins, the Greeks, and the Armenians.

"So jealous are the various churches of their rights, that even the sweeping of the dust is sometimes a dangerous task, and there is a column in which are three nails, one on which the Latins may hang a picture, one on which the Greeks may do so, and a neutral nail on which no sect may hang anything.

"In the floor there is a star, and round it a Latin inscription which says: 'Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary.' The removal of this star years ago led to a quarrel between France and Russia which blazed into the Crimean War."

My point is this, that that place which rejected the heavenly Christ has become the scene of the expression, the most intensive expression, of the false Church, the false conception of what that Church is. We have said that in Jerusalem the delusion of Christendom has its intense expression, but it is only an explanation of how far a failure to represent God's thought really can go. The degree may vary; the principle remains the same. If man, apart from the dominion of the Holy Spirit in any measure however minute, intrudes into the things of God, be it in thought, intellect, reason or feeling, desire, emotion or will, determination, possession, the effect will be a proportionate measure of death, division, confusion and contradiction.

I have carefully written that statement, so that it should be precisely presented. I am going to repeat it, because upon that everything hangs. The degree may vary; the principle is the same. If man, apart from the dominion of the Holy Spirit in any measure however minute, intrudes into the things of God, the effect will be a proportionate measure of death, division, confusion and contradiction!

Therefore, man must go out as man: Christ, the heavenly Man, must be the Son over God's House, must be the Head of the Church, and His Headship must be administered only by the heavenly Holy Spirit. Herein, also, lies the necessity for the Cross as a constantly working and active reality by which that whole realm, and range, and tissue of carnal man is ruled out, and kept out. Herein, then, is the necessity for the fulness of the Holy Spirit, if the Church is to come to that place seen for her, as coming down from out of heaven, to be the centre of God's universe, God's government of this universe.

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