

The Testimony of Jesus

by T. Austin-Sparks

T. Austin-Sparks explores the spiritual essence of the Church and its vital role in bearing the testimony of Jesus in the world.

Scripture: 1 Timothy 3:5, 1 Timothy 3:14-15, 2 Timothy 1:9, 2 Timothy 2:10, Hebrews 1:2, 1 John 4:20, Revelation 1:9, Revelation 3:1, Revelation 4:5, Revelation 5:6

Topics: "The Nature of the Church", "The Testimony of Jesus"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the transformation of Christianity from its original spiritual essence to a more formal and institutionalized structure by the end of the apostolic age. He highlights the Apostle Paul's letters to Timothy as a call to recover the true nature of the Church, which is a spiritual entity governed by the Holy Spirit, rather than a mere organization. Sparks argues that the Church exists to embody the testimony of Jesus, demonstrating His living presence and victory over death. He stresses the importance of viewing the Church from Heaven's perspective, where it is seen as a unified body of believers rather than divided sects. Ultimately, the Church's mission is to express the nature of Christ and maintain the testimony of Jesus in a world that seeks to undermine it.

Transcript

We have seen that, at the end of the apostolic age, and with the close of the first Christian century, Christianity had completely changed. It had lost its primal, original character and nature. And it was in the consciousness of the onset of this change that the Apostle wrote these letters to Timothy, and sought to indicate the way - the only way, God's way - of keeping the things of God pure, maintaining them according to their original nature. In God's thought for 'Christianity' - I use that wide term for the moment - everything had been, and was intended to be, wholly spiritual; whereas that which was developing was a system - formal, ecclesiastical, outward and so on, ordered, governed, arranged and carried on by man. These letters are a strong appeal for the recovery and maintenance of that wholly spiritual character in every department and every aspect of the life of the Christian community.

Now I have used the large word 'Christianity' and the term 'the Christian community', and I am coming immediately to what they really mean - the proper term for them - for neither of those expressions is used in the New Testament. There is a term for what they are intended to mean, and that term is "the Church". I ask you to look at one or two fragments from these letters which intimate the matter.

"If a man knoweth not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?" (1 Timothy 3:5). We leave the context and immediate application, and just note that this that is called the Church of God is introduced, is referred to, as something that must have been known and recognized, as something taken for granted. There is such a thing as the Church of God. Again: "These things write I unto thee, that thou mayest know how men ought to behave themselves in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth" (1 Timothy 3:14,15). Finally: "Therefore I endure all things for the elect's sake, that they also may obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory" (2 Timothy 2:10).

Here then we have, in both letters, attention drawn to the CHURCH. What we have been saying about this turning-point in Christian history, this change which was coming about, this departure from the original character and nature, was a CHURCH matter. It was not just 'Christianity', in that very general term; it was not only that certain Christians were losing out, that a state of spiritual decline had set in with some believers. It was a Church matter. The departure was the departure of the Church. And so these two letters are essentially Church letters: that will become even more clear to you if you just read them through.

Now it is quite clear, from the verses we have just read, that the Apostle was speaking of the Church in more than one conception. He was not saying to Timothy, who was in the church in Ephesus, and had a great responsibility given him by the Apostle in relation to that church, 'Now Ephesus is the church of the living God.' He was not saying that any local church is THE Church. But, to turn it round the other way, he was saying that THE Church as a whole should find its representation in every local church, that what is true of the whole Church, in the mind of God, ought to be true wherever it is found in a local expression. Any local church should be a representation of THE Church as a whole. And then the Apostle brings it down to the individuals, the persons, and, in effect, clearly says, 'Now, any one of you individuals can show what the Church is meant to be, as a whole, or else you can let it down. You are not just individual Christians - yours is a Church responsibility!'

What Is The Church?

This matter is of very great importance in the connection with which we are occupied - God's first supreme thought concerning the Church. What is the Church? That is the first question. I think Paul very definitely gives us the answer in a particular term that he uses. "Therefore I endure all things for the elect's sake..." (2 Timothy 2:10). If you look at the context, you will see that the Apostle takes that back to what he here calls "before times eternal". So the Church is something which is 'elect before times eternal', something quite clearly defined as an elect people, an elect body, which has its roots in eternity past, and therefore is not historical. It is eternal, and therefore it must be spiritual. We may just note one other relevant verse in this connection: "Who saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works, but according to His own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before times eternal..." (2 Tim. 1:9). "Purpose... grace... given us in Christ Jesus before times eternal". So the very first thing is that the Church, according to God's mind, is altogether different from, and above, anything that is historical - anything, that is, that has its beginnings and course and development in time. This is something which has its beginnings in eternity past, and its course is ordered according to the purpose conceived in eternity past. This is something not constituted by man, not brought into being by any human effort whatsoever: this is something which is constituted by the Holy Spirit, the eternal Spirit. And, as we were seeing earlier, that which is constituted by the Holy Spirit is essentially a spiritual thing. "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit."

Now that, as we saw, relates to the new birth of the individual: the individual Christian is essentially constituted a spiritual being by the work of the Holy Spirit. And what is true of the individual is true of the aggregate of the born-again: the Church is something born of the Holy Spirit and therefore is a spiritual thing. That does not mean that it is abstract. I have heard someone, praying in a meeting, make the petition that the message should not be 'so spiritual that it was hidden and not manifest'. Well, we know exactly what he meant and are in full agreement, and I am not putting him right when I say that it is impossible for anything to be spiritual and not manifest. Can the Holy Spirit be present, active, living, and no one know it? What is spiritual is not just abstract, indefinite; something intangible, in the air, like a vapour or a cloud. What is spiritual is terrific, it is mighty; and so, when the Church was really a spiritual body, it was - and the word can be well applied - it was terrific.

I referred earlier to what the Church encountered, which was developing just at the time that Paul wrote these very letters. It caused his own imprisonment and his own execution, and it was the cause of much that Paul wrote to Timothy about being strong. For Timothy himself had been arrested with Paul and imprisoned, and later released. Paul (or the author of the letter to the Hebrews) wrote: "Know ye that our brother Timothy hath been set at liberty" (Heb. 13:23). But Timothy knew something of what was pending. He needed to be encouraged to be strong. I am referring to what the Church had to encounter in those unspeakable persecutions, horrors diabolical, indescribable, going on for many, many years, with the whole Roman world, the greatest Empire that had been, determined to blot out the name of Jesus of Nazareth by liquidating the last Christian on this earth; and it stood at nothing, human or inhuman, to do it. And when it had done its worst, the Roman Empire went to ashes and the Church rose out of them, triumphant, growing. Yes, anything that is of the Holy Spirit is a tremendous thing; nothing can stand before it. Spirituality, true Divine spirituality - that which is born of the Spirit and filled with the Spirit and governed by the Spirit - is not something abstract: it is a potent force in this universe.

The Church A Spiritual People

So the Church, according to the Divine conception, consists essentially of - indeed is - a spiritual people, and we must somehow get to the place where we see it as God and as Heaven sees it. And that means a tremendous adjustment for us to make. Our practical difficulty is this. In apostolic times, it was quite easy to see the Church as a single entity. Although it was represented in numerous local companies all over the Roman world, yet it was still a single entity: it was not then divided up into the '-ists' and the '-ans' and the '-ians' and the '-ics' and the 'isms' and all the other terminations that we know today. When you speak to Christian people today, they very soon ask you if you are an '-ist', or an '-ic', or an '-an', or an '-ian', and they say I am an... 'ist'. Ah, but there was nothing of that in the Church in the days of the Apostles. Whatever little differences there were amongst the Lord's people locally, the Church as a whole was one entity, everywhere, held together by spiritual ties and by spiritual ministries, but with no central government or sectional government of affiliated bodies. It was just one, everywhere. If you had gone from one province to another, from one country to another, visiting the Christians in every place, they would never have asked you whether you were an '-ist', or an '-ian', or an '-ic' - whether you belonged to some particular group, distinguished by a special name. No, you were a Christian - that was enough. You belonged to the Lord - that was enough.

But, with the closing of the apostolic age, things were changing - changing into what we have today. An altogether wrong and false mentality has grown up around the word 'church'. Most people today, when that word is used, think of one of these things with a special termination, or of some place or building - a 'church' - and that is the mentality that is common. Let us be quite clear: recovery of the original demands

an escape from that mentality. Do not misunderstand me: I am not saying you have got to come out of this and that and the other thing - I am saying that you have got to get out of a MENTALITY. We need absolute emancipation from this earth mentality about the Church, into the heavenly standpoint; to see what the Church really is, as God sees it and as Heaven sees it. We must get free of the confusion which has been brought about by the historical institution called 'The Church'.

What is the Church, from Heaven's standpoint? Heaven does not look upon the matter in the light of these titles, and these sections, and these departments, and these bodies, and these divisions; it does not look at it like that at all. Heaven ignores all that, and looks for members of Christ, born-again children of God, spiritual people, in their constitution by new birth and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. And wherever Heaven sees those - whether it be in an 'ism', or an '-ic', or an '-an', or anything else - that is the Church, and you and I have got to adjust to that. A CONGREGATION is not the Church, but WITHIN a congregation the Church may be represented by only two people. Out of 100 people gathered in what is called a church, 98 may be unsaved people, though adherents and communicants and all the rest, and two may be born-again ones. Those two are the Church, and the others are not! That is what the Church is. It is constituted by the Holy Spirit bringing through to new birth spiritually-made people.

I said Heaven ignores the other. In a sense that is true, but maybe in another sense it is not true, because Heaven will judge the other as a false thing. In a sense, however, Heaven ignores, and I say this because it is a thing that you and I have got to do: meet people - no matter in what they are; you may not agree with it, you may think it is false; you have got to ignore that - meet people on the ground of Christ, have to do with them, as far as you can, solely on the ground that they belong to the Lord. Our only enquiry has got to be: 'Do you belong to the Lord? are you born again?' That is all. And then, if they say, 'I am a so-and-soist: what are you?', we must reply, 'That does not matter; leave that out. We belong to the Lord: let us be content with this.' Until you and I can do that, we are held in the lifeless grip of a thing that has lost its spiritual power - because it has lost its true identity, its true nature, which was SPIRITUAL. Yes, we must adjust to Heaven's point of view. I am really only giving you the Letter to the Ephesians! That is how it is seen in Heaven.

For What Does The Church Exist?

Well, that is the answer, very inadequately, very briefly, to the question, What is the Church? The second question is: For what does the Church exist? We have it stated for us by Paul here, have we not, in the very words that we have read: "...how men ought to behave themselves in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and stay of the truth" - and there ought to be no full period there, only a pause to take a breath - "And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness; He Who was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen of angels, preached among the nations, believed on in the world, received up in glory" (1 Tim. 3:15-16). That is the deposit in the Church; that is the testimony of Jesus. For that the Church exists. It is to that the Apostle refers, you notice, more than once, when he says: "O Timothy, guard that which is committed unto thee..." (1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:14). 'O Timothy, guard the deposit, the trust...' The Church is the repository of the testimony of Jesus.

What is the testimony of Jesus? There are, of course, certain statements about it here, in the passage we have just read. But I am not going to take up these different clauses, because I am not at the moment concerned with Christian doctrine, or with the doctrine of the Church. I am occupied with the Church itself. But I turn you now to the Book of the Revelation, for, as we have said in our last chapter, the writings of John, written after Paul had finished his work and gone to glory, related to the full development of this very

thing whose beginnings Paul had witnessed. The Book of the Revelation is peculiarly appropriate to this state of spiritual departure and declension, and you find that the all-governing thing of the whole book is this one phrase: "the testimony of Jesus".

John said that he was "in the isle... called Patmos, for the word of God and the testimony of Jesus" (Rev. 1:9). But there is a Divine sovereignty over the Roman Empire, over the persecutors and over the one who has sent him to Patmos - a Divine sovereignty which says: 'Right, this is what I have brought you here for! They sent you, but I have brought you! This is not their sovereignty that has put you here; this is Mine. I have something to say to the Church, and I have given you a quiet time to say it for Me.' 'I was in the isle that is called Patmos - because the Roman Empire sent me there? because the Roman Emperor sent me there? because the persecutors caught me and sent me there?' Not a bit of it! "I was in the isle... called Patmos... for... the testimony of Jesus". Now that may have been because he had stood for the testimony of Jesus: but it is very impressive, is it not, that that phrase runs through this whole book, and is seen, as we go on, to be the thing by which the Lord is judging, first of all the churches, and then, representatively, the Church as a whole. And, having dealt with the Church on the basis of the testimony of Jesus, He moves on to deal with the nations, and eventually with the Devil himself and his kingdom. It is all related to the testimony of Jesus.

The Living Presence Of Jesus

What is it? Well, the testimony of Jesus is presented to us symbolically right at the beginning of the book, in the declaration - we will leave the symbolism for the moment - made by the Lord Himself. "I am... the Living One... I became dead, and behold, I am alive unto the ages of the ages, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. Write therefore..." What is the testimony of Jesus? The present, living Person of Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit. That is where it begins: the living Person of Jesus. Not the historic Jesus of Palestine of centuries ago - no, the right up-to-date, here-and-now living Jesus, manifested, demonstrated, proved to be alive in the power of the Holy Spirit. Is that carrying it too far? Well, then, why, when the seven churches in Asia are challenged, is there the seven times repeated "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches"? The Holy Spirit has got this matter in hand. The Holy Spirit is challenging - not concerning a creed, or a doctrine as such, but concerning the manifestation of the living Christ, there, and there, and there. The testimony of Jesus, whether it be in Ephesus, or Smyrna, or Pergamum, or in any other place, is just this: that the place where that church is - the town, the city, the province - is to know, in the power of the Holy Spirit, that Jesus is alive! That is where it begins. By its very presence, by its very existence, by its very life there in that place, the one thing that people are to know is that they have not got rid of Jesus. They have not been able to put Him out of this world - He is here, alive!

It is very simple; but that is what the Church is here for, after all. The very basic purpose of the Church is in the first place to make this world know that Jesus is alive, not merely declaring the doctrinal fact, but by living in the power of His resurrection. There are times in some countries when the Church is not able to preach and proclaim the truth of Christ, but that is not the end of its power. Even though silenced in words, it can still make known that Jesus is alive. Yes, the testimony of Jesus is: "I am He that LIVETH..."; "the church of the LIVING God, the pillar and stay of the truth..."; but it is more - it is the living victory of Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. "I became dead, and behold, I am alive..." never to become dead again. "I have the keys of death...", the mastery, the authority, the power over death. 'I have absolutely triumphed over death and all that occasioned death - sin - in the power of the Holy Spirit.' That is the testimony of Jesus: His living victory, present where Christians are.

Are you thinking that this is all very wonderful and very beautiful, but is this practical? Listen! It is so practical that, if you are a living member of Christ, and if you are in a company of believers, born-again believers, constituted by the Holy Spirit, on this true spiritual basis, you will, without doubt, be taken into situations, conditions, where only the resurrection power of Jesus Christ will get you through! Your very survival will necessitate your knowing the power of His resurrection. For individual believers, from time to time, and for local companies of the Lord's people, just as truly as for the Church universal (as in those days to which I have referred), survival is a testimony to the fact that death has no place here. Death cannot swallow this up - death itself has been swallowed up in victory! What a glorious assurance that is! What a ground of confidence! What an encouragement! We come to times when it looks as though the end has come, we are not going to survive and get through. But never believe it! The life of Jesus was not taken from Him by men: He deliberately laid it down, by His own free will. "This authority", He said, "I received from My Father." The life of Paul was not taken from him by the executioner's axe just outside Rome. "I am already being offered, and the time of my departure is come." Here is a man who knows when it is the Lord's time for him to go to glory: he is just being offered up, and he is handing himself over. Paul never said, 'I am going to be executed, they are going to kill me'; he said, 'I am being offered up'.

If you and I are living on the basis of this One, Who says: "I became dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore" - if we are living in the power of His resurrection, our end will be God-governed, not man-governed. It will be when the Lord says, 'It is enough', not when circumstances dictate. God is in charge of this where His Church is concerned. And so, whatever the world does, whatever men do, and whatever the Devil does with the Church, local or universal, if it is really on this basis, it just cannot be brought to nought. Gamaliel is our standby here, is he not? 'If it is of God, you had better leave it alone; you had better not be found to be fighting against God. Be careful! If it is not of God, well, it will peter out sooner or later; but if it is of God, you can do nothing...' (Acts 5:34-39). And that from a non-Christian! You see the point. This is the Church which is to embody the testimony of Jesus in terms of a life that has conquered death, to be the embodiment of a living victory in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Expressing The Nature Of Christ

And then it is to be the expression of the living nature and character of Jesus in the Holy Spirit. That is far too large a matter for us to consider fully here; it can only be stated. But it must be stated, because, both in these letters to Timothy and in the Revelation, much is made of this matter of the expression of the Lord Jesus in His character. The decline was from a level of character, the departure was from an expression of what Christ is in His nature. We can never, never overcome the world, nor the Devil and all his powers, if that same Devil has got a foothold right in our being, if there is something there that is of himself in moral failure or delinquency. In the power of the same Holy Spirit, you and I have got to exemplify Christ - the Church must exemplify Christ, express what Christ is; not merely give out facts about Christ, but be the embodiment of Christ's nature.

That is why John, coming back at the end of the apostolic age, has so much to say about this matter of love. 'You don't know the Lord', he says, 'if you don't love your brother. It is no use your saying you love the Lord, if you don't love your brother - that is all nonsense'. In other words, it is hypocrisy. 'How can a man love God, Whom he has not seen, if he does not love his brother whom he has seen?' (1 John 4:20). That is John's argument. It is a matter of 'walking in the light as He is in the light' (chapter 1:7). So much of John's writings touches upon this thing. Look at those letters to the seven churches. What they are concerned with is state, condition, with lost spiritual life, in the sense of expressing what Christ is like in His nature. That is the testimony of Jesus. The testimony is lost if you and I are unChrist-like. It is no use

using phrases, and making claims: these have to be substantiated by what we are like, and what we are like must be what Christ is like. The Church is for that purpose. It does not merely consist of a set of doctrines to be upheld - although the doctrines must be upheld; not of a number of ordinances to be maintained and repeated, not of congregations of Christians having meetings and conferences. It is to be the embodiment of Christ by the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit Governing From Heaven

Now, coming back to the matter of the point of change that we mentioned earlier, the Church in which we find ourselves today, with all its break-up and division, its sectionalism and so on, is so different from what we have just described. How are we going to get over this? Well, it just depends where the seat of government is, does it not? As things are today, there is no one government of the whole Church on this earth, is there? We do not admit the claims of Rome. But it is not true for any section that the headquarters of the Church is any PLACE. The headquarters of THE CHURCH is in Heaven. THE seat of government of THE Church is in Heaven; it is nowhere else. And the Lord will not allow it to be anywhere else. When Jerusalem was beginning to assume the character of a governmental headquarters for the expanding Church, the Lord scattered them to the ends of the earth. No headquarters on earth! Headquarters is in Heaven.

At this point I would like to take you into the Book of the Revelation again, and indicate certain passages, though without staying for much comment on each.

"John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him Which is and Which was and Which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before His throne..." (Rev. 1:4).

"These things saith He That hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works..." (3:1).

"Out of the throne proceed lightnings and voices and thunders. And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God" (4: 5).

"I saw in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, a Lamb standing, as though it had been slain, having seven horns, and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God..." (5:6).

This book is, as you know, just full of symbols. Here you have these four references to the seven Spirits. It does not, of course, mean that there were seven separate Spirits. Seven is the number of spiritual entirety, completeness, fullness. When you come to the number seven, you have completed something: for instance, the seventh day marked the completion of creation. I need not go further. Seven is spiritual completeness: so that the symbolism here is of the fullness, the completeness, the absoluteness of the Holy Spirit. "These things saith He That hath the seven Spirits..." This that is going to be said is in the authority and the power of the Holy Spirit. HE is in charge of this matter, He it is that is inditing these things that are to be said, He it is that is before the throne. The Holy Spirit, in touch with the seat of government, is dealing with things down here. Have you grasped that? There are all these things down here on the earth, but the throne, the seat of the government of everything, is up there.

Note that the first connection of the seven Spirits is with the throne and with the "seven stars" which are "the angels of the seven churches" (1:16,20; 3:1). The throne of government of things down here is in the hands of the Holy Spirit, in the fullness of His power and intelligence. The "seven eyes" speak of His

knowing all about it, seeing perfectly the truth through all the deception, through all the masks, through all the pretence and profession, through the 'name to live'; perfect perception, perfect knowledge, perfect comprehension. The Holy Spirit is governing in the fullness of His knowledge. And in the fullness of His power - "seven lamps of fire burning". This is not cold light, this is not just theoretical knowledge; this is not something abstract. It is a burning lamp, it is something that is alive with fire, with power: He has come to deal with this situation in the burning power of His judgment and of His knowledge. Things are alive with the Holy Spirit.

In order to pass with Him, then, the Holy Spirit requires that everything must be purely spiritual. It has got to be according to the judgment of the HOLY Spirit, the Spirit of God. The Holy Spirit operates in relation to "The Lamb in the Throne". That is the testimony in relation to all our sin, and all our failure: it is the Lamb in the throne. But what we are saying is that the Lord's idea of a Church, in any dispensation, in any age, at any time, in any place, is that it is essentially a spiritual thing, essentially a heavenly thing; it is essentially governed by the Holy Spirit. The headquarters are in the throne, and the Holy Spirit administers the Church from Heaven. If He does not, then man will have to administer it himself, and he will make an awful mess of it, as he has done. Oh, for a people, wherever they are - whether local companies or the Lord's people at large - really to be under this government of the Holy Spirit!

I will close by saying this. Every one of us, and young Christians perhaps especially, need to realize this: that, in coming to the Lord, having received Christ as our Saviour, having become a Christian, having been converted - however you may put it - if you have been truly born again, you are not just a Christian individual. You are a part of an eternally foreseen, chosen Body, you belong to a great spiritual, corporate entity, you belong to every other truly born-again child of God. Yours is a related life and not just an individual life. So much depends upon your realizing that! You have not JUST 'become a Christian' - you have become something infinitely more than that. You have become a member of this timeless, heavenly thing, conceived "before times eternal", fulfilling its real vocation when time shall be no more. That is what you have come into! And you have come into a tremendous vocation, to be part of that which is to keep alive the testimony of Jesus in this world.

You see, the Devil and his vast kingdom of countless hosts of evil spirits, as Paul puts it, is out against one thing, and one thing only. From the beginning, when Jesus Christ was "appointed heir of all things" (Heb. 1: 2), Satan has relentlessly and unceasingly set himself to frustrate and spoil and destroy one thing - the testimony of Jesus. And if he divides us up and gets in between us, he has touched the testimony of Jesus, because the testimony of Jesus is so bound up with our united and related life.

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