

The Ultimate Criterion

by T. Austin-Sparks

The ultimate criterion for the House of God is that God is present and may be found there, and this is achieved through the absolute enthronement, exaltation, and authority of Jesus Christ on the Throne.

Scripture: Genesis 1:31, Exodus 25:9, Ezekiel 47:9, Ezekiel 48:35, Haggai 2:3-9, Malachi 3:1, Matthew 28:20, John 1:14, John 3:3, Acts 17:31

Topics: "The Church as God's Dwelling", "God's Presence"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that God's ultimate desire is to dwell among His people, as seen from the beginning of creation when He declared it 'very good'. He traces the history of God's presence from the Garden of Eden to the Tabernacle and Temple, highlighting the failures of Israel to fulfill their purpose as God's habitation. The sermon reveals that the Incarnation of Christ and the coming of the Holy Spirit mark significant expressions of God's intention to dwell with humanity. Sparks stresses that the true criterion for any church or gathering is the presence of God, which is contingent upon the exaltation of Christ, the centrality of the Cross, and the measure of Christ in believers. Ultimately, he calls for a preparation of hearts and communities to ensure that God can fully manifest His presence among them.

Transcript

When, as we read at the beginning of the Bible, conditions were such as to make it possible for God to pass the verdict, "It is very good", then God was found present in communion and fellowship with man. We are not told very much about how He was present: we are told that He walked in the garden in the cool of the day; that He talked with man, and made known to him His thoughts. So far as the story goes, we know little more about it than that. It may well have been much like the forty days after the resurrection, when the Lord Jesus came, showed Himself, spoke, and went, and came again, and went. There may have been a coming and a going, showing and speaking, making it clear that the desire and thought of His heart was to be present, and, in personal presence, to be able to commune and communicate.

But so soon He had to withdraw. Conditions changed; they no longer corresponded to His mind, no longer made it possible for Him to say, "It is very good". The change made it necessary for Him to withdraw. In a sense, morally, He was driven out - expelled. But, again and again, through history, we are told of God's effort to recover a condition suitable and well-pleasing to Himself, so that He might return.

He gave to Moses the pattern of a heavenly habitation (Ex 25:9) and, when all things were made according to the pattern, it was as if God said again, "It is very good" - and He returned and filled the

Tabernacle. But again, it cannot be abiding. It is a habitation in figure and in type, and in a measure; but things are not fully and finally according to His mind in the people themselves. Later, He gave to David another pattern - the pattern of a Temple, a representation again of a heavenly habitation (1 Chron 28:11,12,19); and when all things were made according to that revealed pattern, God came and filled the temple, again showing that this is what He is ever seeking. But yet again things changed, and we have the sad story of the glory departing, removing, going away (Ezek 9:3; 10:18,19; 11:23), and that habitation remaining just a 'thing' - an empty shell, a cold, unreal formality.

The Old Testament closes on the note of failure in this great purpose of God; failure, and yet promise. "Who is left among you that saw this house in its former glory? and how do ye see it now? is it not in your eyes as nothing? Yet... The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former..." (Haggai 2:3,4,9) And then that great statement: "Yet once... and I will shake... the earth... and the desire of all nations shall come..." (verses 6,7). He is the desire of all nations. You will remember that those words are taken up by the writer of the letter to the Hebrews (12:26), and applied to the shaking of everything here on this earth that is but a representation - a type, a figure, a symbol - in order that the spiritual reality may take its place.

Three Expressions of God's Thought

There are, in the Bible, three major expressions of this Divine thought for a dwelling-place among men. There are other minor ones, but three major ones stand out above the others.

Firstly, Israel. We have not understood Israel until we have recognized that that people was chosen among the peoples of this earth for this one, sole, and only object - that God should find in a people a habitation suitable for Himself. He strove, He laboured, He longed, He suffered; He showed His infinite patience and mercy and long-suffering with that people, because His heart was bound up with the realization of this eternal thought and object, that of having a habitation here in a people. I repeat: we do not understand the dismissal of Israel from the Divine program, until we have recognized their utter and final failure to fulfil that vocation.

But God has not abandoned His purpose. We turn the page from the Old Testament to the New, and we find the next consummate movement of God in relation to this purpose. The second great expression - perhaps we may call it the inclusive expression - of His thought is in the Incarnation itself: "Immanuel, God with us". Again, we have not understood the Incarnation, until we have related it to this eternal thought - God finding in man a habitation, making man the place of His dwelling. In the person of His Son, He has found His Sanctuary, His Temple, His Tabernacle. "The Word became flesh, and tabernacled among us (and we beheld His glory...)" (John 1:14).

The third major expression is in the advent of the Holy Spirit and the birth of the Church. We have not understood the deeper significance of these great events - the Holy Spirit coming to take up residence in the newly-born Church - until we have related that to this one thing, God is here. The Church is that place of His dwelling and He has come to His Temple. We can see how gloriously that was fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost. Verily 'the messenger of the covenant has come to His temple.' (Malachi 3:1); verily God was present on that day, and did not depart. He has come to stay. It is God Incarnate who says: "I am with you all the days, even unto the consummation of the age" (Matt 28:20). He has come to stay in the Person of the Holy Spirit.

Now, it is quite clear that that was the Divine thought for the Church in general. But then we find that what was to be true of the Church universal, was God's intention for the local churches. The one thing that was

to characterize local companies of God's people - I repeat, companies of God's people - was that God should be found there. That was the ultimate criterion, and that is, as you see, our third message. Let us remind ourselves that 'criterion' just means the principle which determines the standard of judgment; that is, the ground on which any matter is decided; the standard of measure by which things are determined.

The Criterion

The one criterion ultimately of the House of God, universal or local, is ultimately just this: that God is there, and may be found there. That is the dominant thing about it. It is not the methods and the manner, the performance and the rites, the formalities and the ceremonies, and all the other external 'things'. It is that, either in them or through them, or without them, apart from them, God is there - you meet God; you cannot go in there without meeting God. That is the ultimate criterion as to whether the House of God is present as a reality, or not. It is not a place, but a people, in the midst of whom God, in the Person of His Son, Jesus Christ, by His Spirit, is present and known to be present. For is it possible for such a One as He to be present without His presence being known? (Yes, perhaps it can be if there is something wrong with us, but it ought not to be so. It ought to be that, where God is, we know it, because we meet Him). The criterion is just this: Do you meet God? If not, it cannot bear that name, because it does not fulfil that function; we may as well dismiss the thing, cease to try to keep it going, if it is not like that.

The Ground for God's Presence

This brings us to the question of the ground on which God is present. Let me say here, in parenthesis, that God may be present in greater or lesser degrees. What we read of the churches in the New Testament makes it clear that that is so. It is not at all difficult to discern that God was more fully present in one place than in another - that there was a greater measure of the Lord and His glory in this place than in that; for instance, in Philippi as against Corinth. But surely, the thing that ought to concern us is - not that the Lord should be there, so to speak, 'anyhow', but that He should be able to be there without reserve or restraint, giving Himself wholly. It is something that ought to concern us, as individuals, that the Lord should be able to be with us individually, without reserve - just free to commit Himself. And surely the concern of every company of the Lord's people, in every place, should be - not this or that, or some other thing relating to material existence, but - the maximum of the presence of the Lord.

I venture to say that if that were the governing and dominating concern, it would be the key to, and the solution of, many problems. All the difficulties would clear up if we were to say to ourselves - 'Now, the thing that matters more than anything else is that the Lord should have an absolutely clear way to fill this place with His glory. Whatever stands in the way of that must get out of the way.' This must be a mighty motive in our lives. Our eyes must first be opened to see this eternal thought of God; then we must become so wedded to it, it must become so much a passion with us, that anything that may threaten it, obstruct it, limit it, cannot be tolerated. That is the challenge of this message.

But in order that it should be like this, God must have conditions which, on the one hand, will not involve Him in man's disorder - for God will not allow Himself to be involved in man's disorder, He will not commit Himself to that - and which, on the other hand, will be completely suitable to Himself. May this not explain much of the reserve of the Lord, that we, Christian people everywhere, are finding so difficult either to understand or to endure? All the cries and the appeals, the pleadings and the praying, day and night, for a visitation of God: and God seems so reserved and so slow. May it be that God cannot commit Himself to man's order of things, without becoming involved in something that will dishonour Him? I put it in the form

of a question; but it is clearly shown in the Bible that, as a principle, this is so. The cry of the prophets to the people was to put things into such an order or state that God could come. It is something to be taken account of, that in all our praying there may, after all, be something for us to do, in preparing the way of the Lord, casting up a highway for our God, in gathering out the stones which would injure His feet should He come. There may be something!

Satan's Interference

Now, Satan, as we saw previously, in the continuous controversy over this one thing, and in his efforts to prevent God from having an abiding place, has sought, from the beginning, to put man in the way of God. Man was created for the very purpose of providing God with a habitation, for it was ever His intention that He should dwell with man. Therefore Satan's great stroke and effort has been to turn the very man of God's creating against the purpose of God. to turn man into a positive hindrance, a means of frustrating God. That is the long and terrible story of God being hindered by man, and by the conditions created by man. Jesus saw that: He saw quite clearly that the nature and effect of Satan's interference with man was so to change man that God could not come and dwell in him. At the end of the second chapter of the gospel by John, which ought never to be divided from the third chapter, we find this comment about the Lord Jesus, that He would not commit Himself to man, because He knew what was in man (2:24,25). What a terrible thing, that man, who was intended to be God's very temple, should now be in such a state, that God cannot and will not commit Himself to him!

I said that chapter two of John ought never to be separated from chapter three; for, a few verses later (in what in the arrangement is chapter three) we come on this: "You must be born again". What is the point? This throws a new flash of light on new birth: it says that God must have a new kind of man to indwell. And you notice that it was said to an outstanding representative of the Jewish nation: for Nicodemus was a full length portrait of Israel - the people who had claimed to be (what they were intended to be) God's very habitation; who had appropriated God, who had sought to lock God up to themselves, to make Him their exclusive God. It is here in Jerusalem that Jesus, knowing what was in man, would not commit Himself to them; and then, speaking to a representative of such a nation, as to the nation itself, He said: "You must be born from above".

Why this? In order that God, the Holy Spirit, should come right in and take up residence; and that is chapter four. You see, it is all a wonderful sequence. It all centers in this one eternal thought - this thought unlocks the whole Bible, everywhere - the thought of God to be indwelling, in man, in the midst of man. That is why we find the matter of the new birth coming in at the point where Jesus would not commit Himself, because He knew all men, and knew what was in man.

Ezekiel's Visions

So, the question immediately arises: To what will God commit Himself? Let us look at the prophecies of Ezekiel for a few minutes. Do you recall the last words of those prophecies? "The name of the city from that day shall be, Jehovah-Shammah - The Lord is there." With that the book closes. The end is reached; the thought and purpose of God is attained: "The Lord is there"!

Now, leaving aside the controversy over Ezekiel's Temple and House, as to whether there is to be a literal rebuilding of the temple on this earth in Jerusalem, when all this Moslem world has been swept aside, and the mosque of Omar has been obliterated from the Holy City - there is much to be done yet, but it is not impossible with God! - whether it is to be like that, or whether all that is realized in the Church spiritually,

we leave such controversial matter aside, for it is irrelevant to our present purpose. The book of Ezekiel in any case stands for today with much positive application and teaching. Its Divine principles, which are eternal, belonging to no particular age or place, are very clear. As regards the whole end of things - where it is to be, what it is to be - well, the end is summed up in this - The Lord is there!

The whole of these prophecies is a progressive movement towards that end. They begin with the prophet saying that he saw "visions of God"; and then the visions that follow are progressive towards that consummate end: they are the stages and the phases of that progress, showing the principles or the ground upon which that end will be reached - The Lord is there!

The Man On The Throne

The first vision, which in a sense is inclusive of all the rest, is a vision of the Throne: the Throne above the firmament, and upon the Throne above, the likeness of a man. What does it signify? The first, the fundamental, the all-inclusive reality, by which this end of God shall be reached, is the absolute enthronement, exaltation and authority of that Man (with a capital M), the Son of Man, on the Throne, above the firmament. It was there that Stephen saw Him; it was from there that He stooped to encounter Saul of Tarsus. The Man on the Throne: Christ glorified, Christ exalted, Christ in possession of all authority in Heaven and in earth. If God is going to reach the end - "The Lord is there" - that has to become a practical reality in all matters and in all details. This is a fundamental, governing principle: that the Lord will be 'there' in the measure in which it is true that Jesus Christ is exalted, that Jesus Christ has His place as the Exalted One, that He is on the Throne, and that the authority is recognized as being in His hands.

There are many ways in which that can be put. In the Church at the beginning, and in the churches, it meant this, that they never had meetings, committees, councils, for deliberating on what they were going to do: they had prayer meetings, and submitted everything to the Holy Spirit, and took all their instructions from Heaven. It proved to be a very effective thing, did it not?! God was there! That was the effect; that was reality: the Lord was with them - the Lord was there! The place where they were gathered was shaken by His presence. And it was all on the ground of their testimony that this Jesus had been set at the right hand of the Majesty in the Heavens. But that that was not just an objective fact, or even teaching, or truth: it was a practical reality in all the details of every day life. Jesus was referred to, and Jesus was deferred to, in all things - His authority was applied authority, not theoretical.

The Altar

We move on, and we find a man whose appearance is as the appearance of brass, with a measuring line and rod in his hand (Ezek 40:3). And then we come to the great Temple area, the great square of the Temple precincts; and we find that if we draw diagonal lines from the uttermost corners of that great square, at the point where those lines meet and cross, right of the center of that area, is a great Brazen Altar: central and universal, governing all things within and without. A Man of brass - an Altar of brass. Now brass symbolizes righteous judgment: righteousness unto judgment, judgment unto righteousness. At the very heart and center and core of everything is the Cross: the Cross, where everything is brought to judgment and judged according to God's standard of righteousness, of holiness.

That is the ground on which He will be present. We are so familiar with the teaching of the Cross, but we can only rightly appraise and understand the meaning of the Cross of the Lord Jesus, when we see that it relates essentially to this one matter - God's presence. Everything must come to judgment according to God's standard: what cannot pass must be consumed upon the Altar, and what is of God can be

established in Heaven. This is the great discriminating work of the Cross: on that, God will be present. Yes, 'Jehovah-Shammah' comes right back to this: how far has everything been brought to that great judgment of Calvary, and determined as to its acceptance by God?

How searching this is, for all things - in us, in you, in me, in our fellowships, in our assemblies, in our churches, everywhere! Can this pass the judgment of the Cross? What does the Cross say to this and that? How does this stand in the light of Calvary? The answer will determine just how much God is going to commit Himself. That is most important; we cannot get away from that. This Man of brass will see to it: He will measure all things according to the Altar - God's thoughts of righteousness.

The House

And then we move with that Man to the House. If you know the vision of the House, and all that is said about it here, you will be familiar with its dominant feature. The dominant feature of this vision of the House is 'measurement': this Man of brass with His rod, His measuring reed, is moving everywhere within and without measuring, measuring, around and about, so meticulously. What is he doing with this House? He is defining it according to Christ; He is measuring according to Christ; for Christ is going to be the measure of everything. "God... hath appointed a day, in which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man Whom He hath ordained" (Acts 17:31) - it is the Man of brass, to bring everything in the world to judgment according to Himself. If that is true of the world, and judgment is coming to the world, it must begin at the House of God.

Now, to resolve that into one statement, it just means this. If it is to be 'Jehovah-Shammah' - if it is to be "The Lord is there", it will be according to the measure of Christ - just how much there is of Christ there. Neither more nor less will God commit Himself. It is not this or that, or many things, that men think constitute a place for God; it is only one thing - how much of Christ is there? Let that go right into our hearts: how much of Christ is there in you and in me? Does this not explain the infinite pains that God takes, and His preparedness to sacrifice so much, in order to increase our measure of Christ? It is the explanation of so much. Why will He take a very busy and useful servant of His away from His work and shut him up? - why? We say 'loss', we say 'tragedy', we say the Church suffers; but God knows. It matters more to Him that there should be an increase of Christ there for eternal purposes, than perhaps the doing of a lot of busy things for Him.

There must be an explanation of the strange providences of God. May this not be it? I put it again in the form of a question. The Lord is prepared to take any pains to increase the measure of His Son; to make any sacrifice - not just for its own sake, but in relation to the thing to which He has given His heart: that of finding a state suitable for His own presence. And you and I are prepared to say immediately that, where there is most of Christ, there you meet the Lord indeed - "the Lord is there"; the two things go together - though it often means the ruination of ourselves to make place for Him.

So the House is measured, not just as a whole, but at every point, at every corner. As we know from the letter to the Ephesians, it is just the measure of Christ.

The River

Finally, in the visions we come to the river. When He is on His Throne and has His place, and when the Altar is in its place, judging and governing everything according to God's righteousness; and when the House is measured according to Christ - well, what do you expect? Out from that House will emerge and

break a river, fullness, to make 'everything live whithersoever the river cometh' (Ezek 47:9). That happened on the Day of Pentecost. The Lord has got His House; Christ is on the Throne; the Cross has done its work, and the river proceeds spontaneously.

I raise one question in conclusion. It is no criticism, it is no judgment of mine; it is really an exercise. Christians have been praying and pleading for years for revival, revival, revival - that is the word. Well, it happens when God has His conditions. May its delay be explained by the fact that He has not got His conditions? This is not merely an objective question, a subject of interest; it has a very immediate application. What you and I desire is that out of us should flow rivers of living water. Oh, that there might issue from us this stream that makes everything live, so that when we pray with people, when we speak to them, life comes into them; they feel refreshed and renewed: when we move about the world, the effect is that people are helped to live anew. Life comes.

That is true also of our churches, our assemblies, our companies. There can be life flowing out, reaching far out. If God has His conditions, there is no limit to the possibilities of a little company ordered of God, no limit to its range. The influence of that little company, hidden in some little corner, may go to the ends of the earth, may be ministering Christ far, far beyond its own borders. If God has His conditions, it just happens: you do not have to organize great campaigns to do it - it happens! Note: the river comes out of a measured sanctuary; it comes down by way of the Altar; it is from the House according to Christ, which House has been judged by Calvary as to how it stands before God, that the Spirit comes, the Spirit of life.

Let us now sum up. The deciding factors as to the presence of God, more or less - God grant that it may be more and ever more - the deciding factors are: the absolute authority of Christ in everything; the centrality and universality of the Cross; the measure of Christ in believers, individually and collectively. These are God's conditions for that which answers to His own heart and satisfies Him, so that He can be present without restraint or fear - 'Jehovah-Shammah, the Lord is there!'

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