

Vocational Union

by T. Austin-Sparks

T. Austin-Sparks explores the multifaceted concept of the church as a union with Christ, emphasizing its purpose as a dwelling place for God and a community of believers.

Scripture: Matthew 16:18, Ephesians 2:20, Hebrews 3:4

Topics: "Union with Christ", "The Church as God's House"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the concept of the church as a 'house' built by Christ, highlighting our union with Him as living stones that form a spiritual house. He explains that this house serves a divine purpose: to make God's presence available to humanity, and that true worship recognizes God's rights within this temple. Sparks urges believers to understand their identity as part of God's household, which requires purity, love, and loyalty among its members. He concludes by stressing the importance of stewardship and the need for a heavenly order within the church, where every member plays a role in ministering God's grace.

Transcript

"I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18).

"Christ was faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house, if we hold fast our confidence firm unto the end" (Hebrews 2:6, R.S.V. margin).

"Christ Jesus... in whom each several building, fitly framed together, groweth into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom ye also are builded together for a habitation of God in the Spirit" (Ephesians 2:20-22).

"Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:5).

I trust that you are seeing in these various aspects of union with Christ a particular value and meaning and conception bound up with each one. If you have not quite clearly and definitely grasped that, will you please go back again and start at the beginning, not just accepting that these are forms of union with Christ, that there is eternal union and there is creational union and there is marital union, but fasten upon the particular meaning and idea of each one, and, if you can, put a single word against each, a word of your own choosing.

The word which stands against this fourth aspect is vocation, for the house of God is constituted for a specific purpose for which a house exists. Before we can go any further, we must just stop with that word

"house." "Whose house are we." It is a very interesting and a very full word. When we use the word "house," at any rate in English, our minds have a very limited conception. In the original word, all the ideas of a dwelling, a household, an arrangement, the furnishings and the stewardship are found, and it is those various meanings, like the facets of a jewel, that we are now going to consider briefly. But remember that the governing thing is union with CHRIST in this sense, union with Christ as a house.

(a) A Building

The first meaning of the original word is a building. "I will build my church." "Every house is builded by someone; but he that built all things is God" (Heb. 3:4). The house is a building. This building is that which corresponds to Christ Himself. He said, as He looked at the House, the stone house, the great temporal building, and immediately transferred its spiritual significance to Himself, to His own body - "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (John 2:19). "I will build my church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." All the destructive arts of hell will not be able to prevail against that which He builds, His building: a building, not now of stone, but of living stones. That is Peter's word about this house - "Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house."

This house, which "house are we," has as its governing object and vocation the making of God Himself present and available to men. That is the first idea. The building is for a habitation of God, "a habitation of God in the Spirit" a habitation of GOD, in the person of the Holy Spirit, so that God becomes present and available. That is a statement. It could remain just a statement of truth, but things ought not to remain merely as such. It is the setting forth of a test, the test as to whether the house of God exists, and the test as to the existence of the house of God, or of living stones comprising the house of God, is first of all whether God is present or not. Is God known to be there? That is the test of everything so far as the house is concerned, for that is its vocation. It has no meaning apart from that.

In the Old Testament there was a time when the glory went up from the sanctuary: it went up from the place where God had been; and, although the thing continued, the fabric went on, it was a shell - it had no significance, no value, no meaning at all, or, if it had any meaning, it had the meaning of tragedy. The glory had gone up, removed; God was no longer to be found there. So, quite simply, the test of the existence of the house of God and of living stones is just that. Is the Lord found in us, and is the Lord found in the midst of us? If He is, that just satisfies all His requirements. He does not want the elaborate and the ornate structure. "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20). That is the house of God. The house of God is determined, not by a name, a title, a designation, a place, a thing. It is determined by the presence of the Lord, and anywhere, amongst any two or three, no matter where that may be or who they may be, if God is found there, that is the house of God, and that is all God wants.

The trouble with people is that they must have something over and around it, a building to meet in and call the "church." How often the glory has departed immediately something like that has happened; something has gone. Begin to arrange this thing, begin to set up an order of things, and where has the Lord gone? That is what you come to so often. The Lord simply says, Give Me living stones together, and that is all I want. Do not try to improve on that. You can gather more living stones: that is the way but that is all I want - living stones together in an inward "togetherness"; firstly because it is union with Christ, Christ united, Christ in His oneness. The Lord says, Give Me that, and I will make My presence very real.

And then of course the object is not that that should exist merely as something enjoying the Lord's presence. So often that is where a mistake is made. "Yes, we are having a lovely time with the Lord, we few, this little group, we are having a lovely time with the Lord" - and you think that you can perpetuate that indefinitely. You cannot. It is not only for the presence of the Lord: it is to make the Lord available to others, that they may know where to find the Lord - nay more, that they shall know that the Lord CAN BE FOUND. It is to provide the answer to their question, "Will God indeed dwell with men?" Yes, here He is. The presence of the Lord is the answer to men's hearts, to men's quests, and that is enough. When the Holy Spirit came to the Church on the day of Pentecost, "the multitude came together," and that is what happened - God was made available. What is needed is a few living stones, not to discuss doctrine, theology, the technicalities of Church order or anything like that, but to speak of the Lord, to be occupied with the Lord. If the Lord is not enough to occupy us for all our days here, there is something wrong with us. If you peter out - with apologies to Peter! - when you begin to talk about the Lord, and then have to fill up the conversation with all sorts of other things, there is something seriously wrong.

God's eternal desire has been to have a dwelling and to dwell with men. So the Bible reveals. A marvelous thing! It was the thing which astounded Solomon. "Will God in very deed dwell on the earth? behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain thee" (1 Kings 8:27) - "and yet He has commanded me to build Him a house!" God wanting to dwell with men. That is the very first thing about a house - that it should be a place of RESIDENCE. Union with Christ, you see, means bringing God in: for where Christ is corporately expressed and personally present, there God comes in. Do remember that. If you want to know God's presence, be occupied with His Son, for, as we said in an earlier meditation, God's appointments are with His Son.

(b) A Household

The second phase of this wonderful word "house" is union with Christ as a household. That is a slight enlargement of the conception. You will understand what I mean, or what that means, if I remind you that in the Old Testament you have such phrases as "the house of Jacob" or "the house of Israel," or, in the New Testament, "the household of faith" (Gal. 6:10). In Germany you had the House of Hanover; in England you have the House of Windsor.

A household denotes two things - a single progenitor and a family name. For example, the house of Jacob - Jacob was the progenitor, and the house takes his name; or the house of Israel - one man gave his name to a whole line, the house of Israel. And then consider the household of faith. This household of faith - we know who the progenitor is. "I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God" (Gal. 2:20), said the Apostle. We are of those who are of the faith. It is the collective thoughts of one household, and brings in immediately the conception of the Church as a family, Father, Son and children.

Now here I want to say something which is to most of you by no means new, but which is of very great importance. We must not take these things as abstract truths and ideas. We can, of course, have all the teaching on the house of God; we can know what the Bible says about the house of God and get the whole technical conception - and yet it can mean nothing of practical value. This house of God must be expressed locally; it must be found in existence locally. What we are going to say in this connection shortly, under another phase, makes it quite clear that this thing must be in EXISTENCE in order to satisfy God's requirements. There must actually and literally be, in locations, that which corresponds to the union of living stones - be it even so few as two, the irreducible minimum - to provide God with this.

But it is not, let me say it again, an ecclesiastical building called the house of God. Our Christian mentality is all astray. There are people, who really ought to know better - for they are under the sound of the teaching all the time - who, when they come into gatherings, still say, in prayer or in worship, that they are glad to have come to the house of the Lord, meaning that they have come to a PLACE. They do not mean that they are glad to have come into the presence of the Lord's people - though of course that may incidentally be true. The house, for them, is still this other idea of some place, of something external. But that is not it. It is not an ecclesiastical thing - to say nothing about architecture. It is not any particular place or any particular form. We can kill the house of God by starting with its technique - demanding the technique of the house of God. Whatever comes along that line must come organically and spontaneously, as we shall see at another time. We do not begin by constituting something according to a form. We are present together in a place, a location, as living stones, livingly expressing this house of God and fulfilling its vocation, bringing God into that area, making God available. Perhaps that will be better borne out as we go on.

Well, this family conception, this household idea, speaks, firstly, of purity of strain or pedigree. You remember that in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah a very severe test was applied to everyone who had any place at all in recovering and reconstituting the house of God. He had to show his pedigree, because there were a lot of people who wanted to have "a finger in the pie," who wanted to come into that thing and have a place there, and because a lot of people had come in and there had been a mixture of seed, everyone must now show his pedigree. "Now, then, your birth certificate, please; where were you born, when were you born, what is your parentage, how far back does it go?" If I asked you this, what would you say? When were you born?

Now, perhaps you do not have to be able to say the precise day, hour, moment, when it happened, but you must at least be able to say, Yes, I know that at a certain time in my life something happened, and that happening was nothing less than a new birth. You must be able to do that to be in the household. And what is your parentage? Where were you born? Now you would be quite wrong if you said, I was born again at such-and-such a place. The only answer is, I was born in heaven, from above; my citizenship is in heaven, my franchise is in the city of God. "This one was born there" (Psalm 87). "All my fountains are in thee" - I take my rise and my support from up there, the heavenly city. Where were you born, and how far back does your pedigree go? Ah, blessed be God, it goes back beyond time, altogether outside of time. In Christ, we are not children of Adam; we are children of eternity. We are chosen in Him before the foundation of the world.

So this household must imply absolute purity of strain, of pedigree; there must be no mixture here.

Then it speaks of filial relationship, The household of God is a family which is a family bound together by filial relationship. "We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren" (1 John 2:14). The filial relationship and our birth are linked together. You cannot prove your birth if you do not love the brethren - the brotherhood, the family. You cannot prove your birth if that is not true. The proof of our birth is our mutual love one for another.

And then as a household it speaks of loyalty and jealousy for the Name. How the house of God is spoiled, how the household is marred, by our lack of loyalty. We may not think it is lack of loyalty to our Lord - we do not mean it like that - but we all bear His Name, and lack of loyalty to the Name is found in our lack of loyalty to one another. Is it not a terrible tragedy that Christians, whether individuals or companies, find it so easy to criticize one another? There is a loyalty in the world that is very often better than the loyalty

between Christians. Think of the loyalty of the professions - you never hear one doctor speaking to the detriment of another doctor. There is a covenant of honor, there is a standard of loyalty, and there is always an extenuating, an excusing, not only there but in other realms also. But here, sadly, amongst us, we do not so easily try to excuse, to cover a multitude of sins, to let what is good be the object of our attention more than what is bad. That is a contradiction of the household.

And it is very practical. If that is a true conception of God's presence, God being available, then it requires a very practical outworking in our relationships. The house requires the household, the larger conception of the family, of the pure strain of heavenly life that is above this earth.

(c) A Temple

Again, union with Christ is a temple. Perhaps you might think that that has been covered when we say that God is present and God is available. These are not watertight compartment ideas of union with Christ. They are all parts of a whole, the house of God. The temple simply brings out one particular idea. You see, it is not only where God is. God is in His holy temple, but that temple idea is that it is there that God's rights are recognized and where God gets His rights, because that is just the meaning of worship. The temple is the place of worship, and worship is just giving God His rights. God's rights are absolute, and in His temple God gets everything - all is unto God. In the day when the temple was not what God meant it to be, as a figure very much otherwise, indeed - Isaiah wrote, "In the year that king Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple" (Isaiah 6:1). It is the place where there is no room for anyone else. You know the story of Uzziah - how he entered the temple to burn incense, unlawfully, without right he forced his way in and touched the altar, and he was smitten with leprosy and died in a leper-house. In other words, he got into God's place. And then, when Uzziah was out of the way, Isaiah saw the Lord filling the temple. That is the true idea of the temple, and there it is "Holy, holy, holy," as we shall see. The thought behind the temple, then, is - Here, amongst these people here, in the two or the three or in the greater companies locally found, God is getting everything. God has a full, free, unhindered, unreserved way; His rights of complete capitulation, surrender, yieldedness, obedience, are ceded to Him. And it is not just in lip, it is in life. That is the temple, a living temple, a spiritual house. God's rights are ceded to Him.

(d) A Stewardship: (e) An Order

And then, finally, we come to union with Christ as a stewardship and an order. The word translated "stewardship," strangely enough, is from the same root as the Greek word for "house": it means the management of a house or household, and gives us our word "economy." It is the word that is elsewhere translated "dispensation" - what we call an economy, or administration; that is, an order of things - the order which exists in a certain place at a certain time. It has two aspects: one is that it represents and expresses this Divine, heavenly, order; the other, that it is an administrative place, a place of administration, or ministry. That is the double idea of stewardship.

I was saying a little while back that it is foolish to think of a heavenly order being found without some company to express it. There must be that here and there in the earth which EXPRESSES this order, in which this order is seen. Now, I am not contradicting myself in saying again that you must introduce the New Testament system. It just depends on how it comes in, but it must be there. It must be a heavenly order expressed. But it is possible to have the order without the doctrine, and it is better so than to have the doctrine without the order. We have found that the very thing is there, in existence, and people do not

know anything about it. There it is: it exists - a wonderful spiritual order. They have sensed that this is how the Lord would have things done. When it has been pointed out to them that there is a whole revelation from God on that very matter, they had never realized it, but there it is. They have come under the regime of the Holy Spirit, and found that this is how the Lord does things, this is what the Lord would have; it is spontaneous.

So we do not begin by saying, "Now, to have an expression of the heavenly order, you must first bring a company of people together, and then you must have the Lord's Table and baptism, and you must have brethren in authority and corporate ministry - everything must be corporate and in fellowship." Do not have that kind of mentality. It is deadly; it can be as earthly as anything else. You will find, if the Holy Spirit really gets things into His hands, that you will begin to be exercised about things. We have seen that happening so wonderfully. Where Christ is preached, with a seeking of complete and utter surrender and abandonment to Him and the establishment of His lordship and headship; when all those things are brought into view and have been accepted, it is not long before people say, "I am beginning to be exercised about so-and-so; you have never said anything about this, but it has been coming up with me lately."

That is the way, and the only way, that is fruitful and valuable. The Holy Spirit precipitates things when He gets His place. He brings the house, He brings the stewardship, the dispensation, the economy, the heavenly order, and when it comes up like that, it is a very blessed thing, and you say, "This is not some system of teaching I have taken on; it is something the Lord has shown me." That is the way, and the only living way. If you walk in the Spirit, if you really walk in the Spirit, you will find that, as you go on, all sorts of adjustments will be made because the Lord indicates them to you; all sorts of things will be put away or be brought in, because the Lord is speaking. He is a Son over God's house, and as such He is bringing in this heavenly economy, this heavenly order; not to have ordinances, but testimonies - those things which embody spiritual and heavenly principles.

Well, that is familiar ground to many, but to all who read these lines it may not be equally so, and it may be the Lord would have that word said. Yes, union with Christ as a stewardship: there is an arrangement that the Holy Spirit will make in the house of God, that Christ as the Son over God's house will bring into being; a heavenly arrangement. It means a new mentality - "stewards of the mysteries of God" said Paul (1 Cor. 4:1) - a new mentality, a new conception of things; or, as Peter said, "According as each hath received a gift, ministering it among yourselves, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (1 Peter 4:10). In "housekeepers of the manifold grace of God." If you think that is straining the sense, look at the context. "Using hospitality one to another" - that immediately precedes it. "According as each hath received a gift, ministering it among yourselves, as good 'housekeepers' of the manifold grace of God."

It means a new mentality bringing heavenly conceptions; heavenly-mindedness. It says that Adam gave names to everything - I suppose the animals and the flowers. (I am quite sure he did not give Latin names: none of that in Paradise, please!) He gave names to everything. My point is this. We have to find a heavenly name for everything, find out what the Lord calls things. The Lord calls a thing by a certain name. We go round it and call it by other names, but the Lord says, No, that is that, it is this; you are calling it by another name. We have to call things by their right names, give the right heavenly name to things. The Lord calls a certain virtue meekness; we call it weakness. Give the right heavenly names to things and you will have plenty to do - it is a very big world.

The other aspect is administration or ministry: the house as a stewardship, a ministry, a place of ministry. That does not mean, of course, setting up a professional ministry or a particular company called ministers. It is the household; that is the place of ministry. Everybody in this household ought to have a stewardship; everyone ought to be a steward of the manifold grace of God. In some way or other you can be a steward, because you are CALLED to be a steward, to have something of the Lord to give. That is why the Lord is dealing with you as He is. He is trying to make you a steward in His house, to make it possible for you to have something to give to someone else, something of Himself that you have received, that you have come to possess that you can pass on to someone else.

Well, all this is compassed by the word for house, and its related forms, all referring to the house of God. This house is a wonderful thing. Do ask the Lord to make more clear to you what it involves, and let us ask the Lord very much that there may be literal expressions of His heavenly house found more and more widely on this earth.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/t-austin-sparks/vocational-union/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net