

'According to Christ' - Part 2

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of the Church being a revolutionary event, founded on the Cross, and characterized by the Divine Discontent, which leads to spiritual progress and fullness of Christ.

Scripture: Matthew 16:18, John 12:24, Acts 13:46, Romans 6:6, 1 Corinthians 1:18, Galatians 2:20, Ephesians 4:15-16, Colossians 1:18, Hebrews 10:24-25, 1 Peter 2:5

Topics: "Divine Discontent", "The Cross and the Church"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the revolutionary nature of the Church's recognition, which must stem from a spiritual crisis rather than mere tradition. He discusses the concept of Divine Discontent, highlighting that true spiritual progress arises from an inward dissatisfaction with the status quo, leading individuals to seek a deeper connection with God. The sermon stresses that the Church should not merely be a gathering but a response to God's dissatisfaction, embodying the fullness of Christ. Sparks warns against the intrusion of natural man into the spiritual realm, asserting that the Cross must govern the Church's foundation and expression. Ultimately, he calls for a community of crucified individuals, led by the Holy Spirit, to reflect the true essence of the Church.

Transcript

Editorial Two

The first part of this consideration has been a general survey and statement as to the nature and purpose of the Church (universal) and the churches (local). We proceed now to look at foundations, but some things already said need elucidating and enlarging, and the matter now to be considered will serve this purpose, and touch vitally the beginnings of the Church in both its aspects, the universal and the local. At a point we made a statement which, if not rightly understood, could lead to a false position and to unfortunate results. It was this: 'The recognition of the Church is an event which is of such a revolutionary character as to emancipate from all merely traditional, historical, and earthly systems: as see the Apostles, and especially Paul.'

How important it is that that should be kept in the context. In other words, how necessary it is that the 'recognition' should really be an EVENT. There are many who 'break away', and become 'free-lance' people or movements, on any other ground or occasion than a spiritual crisis of seeing the POSITIVE way of the Lord. This often leads to more limitation and negation than was found in the position which they have left. It is true that Paul, at one point, came to a definite crisis over Judaism, and as from that day

said: "Lo, we turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46b). But that is not how he, or the other Apostles, came into the Church. Something happened inside before it happened outside. Their spirits went ahead of their bodies or reason. They inwardly migrated; the Holy Spirit took them even where they had not contemplated - or perhaps intended - going. It was all a spiritual movement, not something of men. It was the Holy Spirit inculcating the significance of Christ.

We are now brought to those more positive features and principles of a Divine movement. The first of these is far from easy to state without the risk of misapprehension. Even the very words used are open to a false interpretation. This is because we are in the presence of one of the many paradoxes with which the Bible abounds. The paradox here is that of Christ satisfying the heart, and yet the Spirit reaching on and ever on. Nevertheless, when rightly understood, this first feature is perfectly clear throughout the Bible, and clearly seen in all God's movements. Since the very constitution of man, from his first digression, is always to digress - and history is one long story of human digression from God's way - all God's return movements have been the result of another element powerfully at work. This element is what we may call-

The Divine Discontent.

We must very heavily underscore the word DIVINE! While 'The word of the Lord' may have come to Patriarchs, Prophets, Judges, Apostles, resulting in a commission and a mandate, it is very easy to discern that, either before or by that word, there was found in them an unrest, a dissatisfaction, a sense that there was something more in the intention of God. Inwardly they were not settled and satisfied. Maybe they could not define or explain it. They did not know what they wanted. It was not just a discontented disposition or nature. It was not just criticism, or querulousness, or 'disgruntledness', a spirit of being 'agin the government', as of a malcontent. GOD was not satisfied, and He was on the move. These sensitive spirits, like Abraham, and Moses, and Samuel, and Daniel, and Nehemiah, and a host of others in every age - Old Testament, New Testament, and since - have been God's pioneers, because of an inward link with His Divine discontent.

Of course, this is one aspect of all spiritual progress, but it is very true of every new thing of God. We shall yet lay down the basis of the difference between natural and spiritual, human and Divine, discontent, but for the moment we are concerned with the fact and the principle. If this discontent is a truly Divine activity, it will not be a matter of mere human frustration. It will have nothing to do with natural ambition or aggressiveness. It will resolve into a sheer issue of spiritual life or death. It will become a soul-travail.

Personal and worldly interests will fail to govern. What is politic from the standpoint of advantages in this life will fail to dictate the course. There may be a Divine restraint as to time, but the inevitable ultimate issue is known deep down. A crisis is known to be imminent, and the issue is one of obedience to the way of the Spirit, or surrender to policy. If the spirit is pure, and the life in God selfless, there will be a growing sense of 'not belonging', of having already moved on, or being out with the Lord, and it is only a matter of being 'obedient to the heavenly vision'.

How often, when we have come into something new of the Lord, we have been able to say: 'This is what I have been looking for and longing for. I did not know what it was, but this answers to a deep call in my heart which has kept me dissatisfied for years'. So, just as the confession or salvation of an individual is always with the sense of having come home, a local church should be to the company a coming home, the supply of a deep need, the answer to a deep longing; just 'my spiritual home'. The spirit has been on a spiritual journey and quest, and now it has found - or is beginning to find - the answer. This quest will

never reach its end until we are all at Home at last; but SOMETHING directly in line with the end, and of the very essence of the full, should be found in the local 'family' representation.

Have we made it clear? Do you see that 'churches' should not be just congregations, preaching places, or places for religious observances? They should be, in their inception, constitution, and continuation, the answer to God's dissatisfaction; that which provides Him with the answer to His age-long quest in the hearts of all concerned. If there is one thing that God has made abundantly clear, it is that He is committed to the fullness of His Son, Jesus Christ. That fullness is to find its first realisation in the Church, "which is the fullness of him". Therefore God will only commit Himself to that which is in line with that purpose. As we have said elsewhere, it can be taken as an axiom that, if we are to find God committing Himself, it is essential to be wholly in line with His object at any given time.

But God MUST have a clear and free way. The Church and the churches are not now the starting-point of God, although they should stand very near to it. Some serious work has to be done before there can be a true expression of the Church in any locality. So, a cursory glance through the Bible will make it clear that the very door to the House of God was the altar. It barred the way, and at the same time led the way, to the Sanctuary. In the New Testament, of course, it is Christ crucified in direct line with Pentecost, the Church, and the churches. The Cross bars the way and points the way.

But when the Church is reached (so to speak), that is not the end of the work of the Cross. When we have come in, the Cross still governs. Thus it comes about that, in the New Testament, we have a very great deal about the Cross IN the Church and the churches. It is quite clear that, when spiritual progress toward the ultimate fullness of Christ was arrested or impeded, or when things became defiled or disordered, the Holy Spirit, through the Apostles' letters, or by a visit, brought in the Cross with fuller meaning or stronger emphasis. This can be seen immediately, when we read such letters as those to the "Romans", "Corinthians", "Galatians", "Ephesians", "Philippians", "Colossians", and "Hebrews", with the Cross as the key. It is back to Christ crucified that the Spirit invariably leads or calls, when purity, truth, life, power, and liberty are in question.

What, then, is the particular relationship of the Cross to the Church, and to the churches themselves?

Undoubtedly, the Cross says that in any true expression of Christ, individually and collectively (which is the sole object of their existence), there is no place for man by nature! Christ crucified goes beyond the door, which is atonement, justification, righteousness as acceptance through faith. Christ crucified is, in representation, the devastation of the whole race of the old creation, with its nature. The agonized cry of God-forsakenness, the accompanying signs in a darkened sun, earthquake and rending rocks, all comprised the mighty 'NO' of God and of Heaven to that creation. That was the all-inclusive climax of every pointer by death through the past ages.

The death of Christ was infinitely more than the martyrdom of Jesus. It was universal and eternal. In that all-comprehending veto was involved every realm affected and infected by Satan's corrupting influence and touch. To bring back into any sphere of God anything that lies under that ban is, on the one side, to deny and contradict the Cross; and, on the other hand, sooner or later to meet certain devastation. This was very early demonstrated, as a sign-instance, in the case of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5), as well as by others in 'Acts' and at Corinth who intruded natural reasoning, passions, and behaviour into the realm of the Holy Spirit's jurisdiction. It is as though the Holy Spirit took hold of the Cross and smote them to death, or, in some cases, very near it.

There is very much tragic history contained in what we have here said; not least the weakness, reproach, confusion and ineffectiveness of the Church and the churches. The natural man serves himself of the Church. In it he displays his importance, his lust for power, his craving for self-expression (very often in ministry itself), and many other aspects of his selfhood - that Satanic thing which was begotten in the race when the supreme 'I' gained man's will for an act of spiritual fornication; for that is what it proved to be.

In the churches, it is all too often - and too much - that we meet people themselves, and not supremely Christ. At the beginning, the essential thing, as we shall see more fully presently, was SPIRITUAL men, as standing over against the 'natural man'. As the Church universal rests solely upon the foundation of Christ crucified, buried, and raised, so the churches must take their character from the foundation. Every member must be a crucified man or woman. Every minister must be a crucified man, and EVIDENTLY so. No man should preach on any other ground than that he is compelled by the Holy Spirit. He should have no NATURAL liking for preaching. Preaching ambition should be crucified! We verily believe that before a true church-expression can emerge, the foundation of the Cross must be deeply and truly laid with devastating effect upon all 'flesh'.

But, if the Lord means to have such an expression, the applying of the Cross will explain the meaning. This will not, and, in the nature of things, cannot, be all done at once. The movement toward fullness is progressive. So, again and again, that movement is marked by the fuller adjustments, releases, cleansings, of new and deeper works of the Cross. For greater fullnesses of Christ, there must be deep despair of any virtue, ability, resource, other than Christ risen and present in the Holy Spirit. We cannot 'form' or 'found' churches like this, but the Lord can bring into being a nucleus of well-crucified leaders, building therewith and thereon. If we put together Matthew 16:18 and John 12:24, we shall see that the first is a declaration of purpose and intention; the second is the way in which it would come about. That way is the organic way, i.e. through death and resurrection, in which every grain shares, and to which all the grains, severally and corporately, are a testimony.

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