

Churches and Workers

by T. Austin-Sparks

The presence and measure of Christ determines everything in a church, and those in responsibility must be spiritual men recognized by all as such.

Scripture: Matthew 18:20, John 1:13, Acts 6:3, Romans 12:4-5, 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, Galatians 5:22-23, Ephesians 4:11-13, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, 1 Peter 2:9, Revelation 2:5

Topics: "Spiritual Leadership", "Presence of Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that the early church was governed by the Holy Spirit, who was responsible for the divine purpose and the formation of the church, rather than human effort or organization. He warns against the tendency of man to impose his own ideas and methods, which can lead to disastrous consequences, and stresses that the true essence of a church is the presence of Christ among its members. Sparks highlights that church leaders should be spiritually qualified individuals, filled with the Holy Spirit, rather than chosen based on worldly criteria. He calls for a return to the original principles of church formation and leadership, which are rooted in the life and presence of Christ. Ultimately, the sermon serves as a reminder that the church's vitality depends on its alignment with the Holy Spirit and the embodiment of Christ.

Transcript

We have laid great emphasis upon the fact that, in the beginnings, everything was under the government of the Holy Spirit who had taken over the whole purpose of God and was its custodian. As in the case of the tabernacle of old, the complete pattern was conceived in heaven to the last detail, and shown. Then Bezaleel and Aholiab were filled with the Spirit of God for all workmanship. Nothing whatever was left to the conception of man, and because eternal, spiritual, divine conceptions lay behind every fragment, God was meticulously particular.

So it was in the first phase of things in the beginning of the new Israel. Man has a great propensity for putting his hand on things, and nothing is too sacred to escape it. The great precaution taken by God when Adam began this kind of thing was: "Lest he put forth his hand..." When that was done, as in instances like Nadab and Abihu, Uzzah, Uzziah, Ananias and Sapphira, etc., the Lord showed His disapproval by swift judgment. Man's hand is always a possessive, a controlling, an arranging hand. His way is to bring things within the compass of his own mind and judgment. There is no compromise between the hands of the Holy Spirit and the hands of man, and any attempt on man's part to compromise will

result in disastrous consequences sooner or later.

There is a clamant need for a deep revision of our mentality regarding what we call New Testament procedure. The starting-point will have to be at the parting of the ways between causes and effects, that is, how and why things began, and the things themselves. We begin at the wrong end, at the place where things are in existence, and we take the things as a pattern, a blueprint, a textbook, and proceed to imitate, to copy, to reproduce. Thus we resolve the New Testament into a handbook of organization. In so doing we overlook the fundamental, elemental, and vital fact that what we have in the New Testament never came that way. Whatever there is in the New Testament which is called an "order" was the normal, natural, spontaneous issue of a kind of life which had been miraculously imparted by the direct act of the same Spirit as brought about the conception of Jesus in the womb of Mary: "Begotten, not created". It was the growth and formation of an organism: "Not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13). This was as true of the whole as it was of the individual parts.

Let us take:

The Case of the Churches

The most general idea is that the apostles, Paul in particular, believed that they were to go and form churches all over the world, that when they entered a province, or a city, their thought was to form a local church there. We shall look in vain for any command of the Lord or intimation from the apostles that this was to be their object. What they did know to be their business was to bring Christ wherever they went. If Christ was rejected there was no church. If Christ was accepted those who accepted Him became a vessel of Christ in that place. The one conception of a church in any place is not a representation of the Christian religion, but an embodiment of Christ. Wheresoever it may be, though it be but two or three present in the content of His name, He is there. It is the presence of Christ which constitutes a church, and it is the increase of and conformity to Christ which is the growth or development of a church. In the book of the Revelation the Lord does not hesitate to threaten the removal of a candlestick if its essential function ceases, however much of Christian form and activity may be present. The essential function and the final criterion is the presence of Christ. The presence of the Lord has ALWAYS been the determining factor in eternal values. It is the Holy Spirit's supreme function to bring Christ into all things and all things into Christ.

Churches, as such, are only a means, and as earthly THINGS they will pass with time. What is of Christ in and through the means will be gathered in a spiritual way into the great church universal which Christ will present to Himself -- "a glorious church". We are not here dealing with the full organism which comes out of the life-seed -- the sowing of Christ -- but just with "as it was in the beginning". Of course, a challenge is involved: How did this and that come into being?

The principle which was to be extended worldwide was inherent in the choosing and sending forth by Christ of the "Seventy". They were sent to every place "where he himself would come". A local church, then, is not IN THE FIRST PLACE something constituted or formed according to a pattern of procedure, but by the presence of Christ in the several or more in that place. These "baptized in one Spirit into one body" are, in effect, Christ in that area, holding that ground as a testimony to His rights, and sending forth "the sweet savour of Christ in every place". Failing this, with regard to its true function the organism is dead.

Carry on the form if you will, but a "church", as such, is no more sacred in the eyes of the Lord than was the tabernacle in Shiloh, or the temple in Jerusalem, once the glory had departed, that is the presence of the Lord.

The Workers

The principle to which we have pointed above is the same in relation to all who have any place of responsibility in the work of the Lord. It is a far cry from modern methods to the beginning. The selection by popular vote, the choosing of "likely" people to hold office, the influence of title, degree, business acumen, success in the world, money, "interest in Christian work", the choice of "novices", and giving or allowing public recognition ON SUCH GROUNDS, is a system which has no place at the beginning. It is usually fraught with trouble sooner or later, and is a dangerous thing for those concerned.

A simple, practical issue arose early at the beginning. It was just a matter of seeing that certain widows were not overlooked as to their daily temporal needs and the righteous ministry of money available. It might be thought that any good man or men with a little business ability could attend to that, but not so at the beginning. The prescription was: "...men of good report, full of the Spirit and of wisdom". "And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: whom they set before the apostles and when they had prayed, they laid their hands on them" (Acts 6).

The matter was carried through with scrupulous care, and the fundamental essential was "full of the Holy Spirit", so that all might see it. In this most elementary phase of procedure the imperative was SPIRITUAL men, recognized by all as such. The "office" did nothing to make them that. They were that before they were entrusted with the most elementary things. Evidently they had proved themselves in the church and were approved by the church before ever they were "appointed". If this was so in the case of the first elementary responsibility, how much more so would it apply to the greater responsibility of elders or overseers.

Before the apostles had finished their course, things began to change in church order. Signs of incipient ecclesiasticism as we know it today, were showing themselves. It is overlooked that when Paul wrote his last letters -- to Timothy -- and said that he wrote that "men might know how they ought to behave themselves in the house of God", he was writing correctively of misbehaviour. That misbehaviour related in the main to those in responsibility, the elders. Paul's corrective was the recognition that elders are not just officials, but they are essentially SPIRITUAL men; men of SPIRITUAL measure and no novices. They ARE elders in character, SPIRITUAL qualifications and gift before they have the title of Elder. The title never makes a man an Elder. If he is not that already, no title will ever make him that! As in the churches, so in their responsible men, it is the presence and measure of Christ which determines everything.

We have done no more than point to a vital principle. Vital in that it will determine the life, course and destiny of anything bearing the name of the Lord.

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