

# Fellowship Between Christ and His Church in Testimony

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The Church's calling is to maintain a witness to the presence of the Lord, and to be the embodiment of Him in the world.*

**Scripture:** John 17:8-21, 1 Corinthians 15:51-52, Ephesians 1:19-21, Ephesians 5:30-32, 1 Thessalonians 4:17, 1 Timothy 3:16, 1 Peter 3:18, 2 Peter 1:4

**Topics:** "Fellowship with Christ", "The Church's Calling"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the profound fellowship between Christ and His Church, illustrating how the Divine nature was manifested in Christ and continues through His Body, the Church. He highlights the Church's calling to be a living testimony of Christ's presence in the world, maintaining a witness of resurrection life amidst a hostile environment. Sparks warns against reducing the Church's purpose to mere religious activities, urging believers to embody the essence of Christ and reflect His love to the world. He concludes with the hope of the Church's future glory, affirming that believers are called to participate in the divine mystery of being received up in glory, just as Christ was.

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## Transcript

Reading: John 17

Keeping this chapter well before us, let us turn to two other passages:

"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 Timothy 3:16).

Before we pass to the other passage, let us notice that the word translated "godliness" in this passage is unique in the New Testament. It is not the word which is commonly used for piety, but the word which means the Divine nature, and the more correct rendering would be: 'Great is the mystery of the Divine nature, which was made visible in flesh.' We mention that because it removes the difficulty which has surrounded this passage for so long.

"... because we are members of his body. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and the twain shall become one flesh. This mystery is great: I speak in regard of

Christ and of the church" (Ephesians 5:30-32).

In those two passages I think we have an interpretation of chapter 17 of the Gospel by John. You may take this passage in Timothy and note its clauses, and carrying everything back into that chapter in John's Gospel you will see that there is a twofold connection: firstly, the connection with Christ personally; secondly, the connection with those who constitute His Church.

### "MANIFESTED IN THE FLESH"

The Divine nature was manifested in flesh. We need hardly spend time in applying that phrase to Christ. There is no doubt that it belongs to Him, that He is the One who fits in there, that He verily was God manifest in the flesh, and that the Divine nature did become incarnated in Him. John 17 quite definitely alludes to the fact: "...they have believed that thou didst send me" (verse 8).

Then John 17 carries things forward to the Church, and while it does not give the full unveiling of the later New Testament writings when the Holy Spirit had come to open up the fullness of the truth, it clearly intimates the truth about to find fulfilment. We can even say that it introduces that truth: "I in them..." (verse 23). That clearly indicates a company constituted as an organism, as a body, of which they are the first members, the nucleus to which others should be continually added through the preaching of the Gospel. Taking their place in the Body thus formed, those who believed would in turn become the vessel of the testimony, the embodiment of Him. Later the Apostle will express it in this way: "Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature..." (2 Peter 1:4). While there is, and ever will remain, a cleft, a division, a distinction between that and any supposition of our thereby becoming God and partaking of Deity, it is none the less true that the great and wonderful reality into which we are all called is the forming of a Body for the indwelling of that Christ of whom it says the Divine nature was manifested in flesh. In this, one object in view was that the manifestation should not cease in this world with the return of Christ to glory, but that there should be a continuation of the earthly manifestation of the Divine nature in Him, but now in Him in His Body here. That is a wonderful and glorious truth. It is a marvellous calling to embody Christ in the Spirit.

But such things are always tests as well as testimonies, always challenges as well as glorious truths. What the Lord is constantly seeking to do with His people, and seemingly more and more so toward the end, is to bring them face to face with the real nature of their calling, and to require that they should face up to it: as we say, toe the line. The very first thing for which the Church is called in its relationship to Christ is to be the manifestation of Him, the Divine nature manifested in flesh: "I in them..." The Church's calling is to maintain here on the earth a witness to the presence, the living presence, of the Lord. That may sound elementary, but it is not so elementary when you consider how things are today. One would be led to think from what does exist today that the Church's purpose on the earth is to hold religious services and to do all sorts of good, charitable works, and to keep religion alive in the earth. Well-meaning and well-intentioned! But much can be brought, and is brought within a compass like that. Almost anything can be put within that range.

I was reading of a church in America where a famous dancer was invited to dance the sermons, to dance the truth of the New Testament, before the congregation. It is pathetically and tragically awful, but there by one in dancing apparel, dancing before a congregation was supposed to be acted New Testament truth: and it is argued for by Scripture - "dancing before the Lord" (2 Samuel 6:16). Brought right out of the theatrical world into what is called the Church to do that! That is an extreme case, but it can find a place

within this idea of keeping religion alive and can be argued for as good. That is a terrible and solemn departure from the truth and in the light of such a thing we need to turn again and consider closely what it really is that the Church is here for. The Church is revealed in the New Testament as constituted for the maintenance in this world of a witness to the living presence of the Lord, the Christ of God - to be the embodiment of Him. Nothing less than that, nothing other than that, justifies the continuation of a thing which goes by the name of the Church. As men and women meet the Church, whether in assembly or the individual members thereof in the common walks of life, they should register the presence of the Lord; they should be obliged to recognize the presence of 'something' which is not just ordinary or natural, and not just the men or the women. The presence of the Lord in the assembly of the Lord's people should mean that strangers, the ungodly, coming in should say: 'God is in the midst of you!' That is the witness for which the Church is called into being.

We cannot continue on any other ground. We are not now alluding to certain prevailing conditions in a general way; we are facing this matter ourselves. The only thing which will justify our being together as the Lord's people is that the one uppermost, predominant feature among us shall be that of a witness to the Lord's presence in life in our midst, and that it must needs be confessed: 'The Lord is in the midst of that people!' If we lose that we have lost our calling. Oh, that we should see to that! "I in them..."

Thus we have the mystery of the Divine nature, which was manifested in the flesh in Christ, continued now in His own. "This mystery is great: I speak in regard of Christ and of the church."

#### "JUSTIFIED IN THE SPIRIT"

What does that mean? When was the Lord Jesus justified in the spirit? For undoubtedly it refers to Him in the first place. What is the meaning of His being justified in the spirit? I think the answer is this: His resurrection. I believe the justification of the Lord Jesus is to be found in God's raising Him from the dead. There may be a broader meaning, a wider explanation, but I believe that is the heart of the matter - that His justification was when God raised Him from the dead. Peter speaks of Him as having been crucified in the flesh, and quickened in the spirit (1 Peter 3:18). When, with regard to that death, God intervened and raised Him from the dead, God justified Him. That was His justification. He stood then in a place with God where all sin, the judgment of which He had voluntarily endured, was put away; where all and every kind of condemnation which had been made to light upon Him when made sin for us, was destroyed. All sin which was made to rest upon Him having been put away by His Cross, God raised Him; He is in the place where He is justified: He is the justified One, Jesus Christ the Righteous. That applies to something other than the righteousness, the holiness, which was inherent in Himself; it applies to the righteousness, the holiness, which is His as having been made Man, and made sin, and having borne that sin away in judgment, so that God can be just, and the justifier of all them that believe. When God raised Him from the dead it was His great act of justifying the Lord Jesus.

Now where do we find "resurrection" in John 17? "Even as thou gavest him authority over all flesh, that whatsoever thou hast given him, to them he should give eternal life" (verse 2). There is no eternal life except on the ground of Christ risen, and He here speaks as though already He is in resurrection. How often in this chapter does the Lord use this phrase: "... whom thou hast given me..." He gives three things to those whom the Father has given him:

1. He gives them eternal life (verse 2).
2. He gives the revelation of the Father's name (verse 6).

3. He gives them the words of God (verse 8).

He gives eternal life. Eternal life is the fruit of His death and resurrection. It could not be said to be eternal life had not death been destroyed and all the possibility of its being corrupted been utterly abolished. This life is ours on the ground of Christ's destruction of death, and of His having entered for us into that life which is deathless.

What is the Church's calling? It has been raised up to maintain the testimony in this world of a life which is triumphant over death. How often that has been said! That is the heart of the Lord's word to us at this time - the power of a deathless life, a life which cannot be conquered and quenched by death. That is set in John 17 against the background of a world that is hostile, inimical, hating: "... the world hated them..." (verse 14); "I pray not that thou shouldest take them from the world, but that thou shouldest keep them from the evil one" (verse 15). (The word "evil" being in the masculine it is justifiable to add the word "one".) Here is an evil one, and a hating world, and any spiritual person will tell you that, in effect, that is death - the spirit and power of death encompassing the Lord's people. Now the Lord does not ask that His Church should be taken out from the world, but that, being in it, it should maintain a testimony against, and contrary to, the spirit of it. The testimony is that of life in the midst of death. The supreme challenge to the Church's faithfulness, to the Church's ministry, to the Church's true vocation, is as to whether its condition bears true witness that it is not being overcome of spiritual death, that it really is expressing a life which is more powerful than the power of death that is all around it.

Do not allow the word 'Church' to mislead you, and think of some entity apart from yourself. We must make an individual application, because if we are in living union with Christ we are His members, a part of the Church which is His Body, and what we are saying applies to us individually as well as collectively. It is not possible for all to have the advantage of a collective fellowship of the Lord's people. Some have to live in places where they are desperately alone. It may be that there is not very much spiritual life where we are, and not much help along the line of spiritual fellowship; nevertheless this word is for such. We have to do, not only with the responsibility and the challenge, but with the glorious fact that this into which we are called, and which is provided for by the Lord, and ordained, is that His people here, whether they be able to gather together with all the advantages of so doing, or whether they be scattered and isolated shall have in them the power of His life to transcend the power of death around them.

If that is revealed as the Lord's will, let us first of all readily admit the possibility of its realization and then accept the fact that, since it is the Lord's will, it must be possible. As for you and me, let us stand in our spirit for that life expression from the risen Lord which shall transcend the death that is all around us, and which presses upon us - the evil one and the hatred of men. The Lord said: "I pray not that thou shouldest take them from the world, but that thou shouldest keep them..." The power in them is the power of His risen life.

What we have been saying is so very much in accord with the fuller revelation of the Ephesian letter: "The exceeding greatness of his power to usward who believe, according to that working of the strength of his might which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and made him to sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all..." (Ephesians 1:19-21): "... to usward who believe..." We must stand for that strongly and definitely, because that is the testimony of the Lord Jesus.

"Justified in the spirit"! What is the Church's justification? It is that it stands on resurrection ground, manifesting resurrection life. Blessed be God, so far as our salvation is concerned, we are justified on the

ground of being risen together with Christ. We take it that if we have been raised together with Him, we have been justified. God would never have brought us into resurrection union with Christ apart from justification. But so far as our calling, our vocation, is concerned, we are justified by the maintaining of the witness of His resurrection. That is the justification that applies to service, to instrumentalities.

## "SEEN OF ANGELS"

After His resurrection He was seen of angels. We hardly need go back to the Gospels to indicate the record of the angelic attendants after His resurrection. There was the angel who rolled away the stone. There were two who sat on the stone. There were the angels who spoke of the risen Lord and told certain women exactly where they would find Him. Yes, angels saw Him after His resurrection. Now where in that connection does the Church come in? Oh, the Church is related in a wonderful way. Come again to the letter to the Ephesians and read: "To the intent that now unto the principalities and the powers in heavenly places might be made known through the church the manifold wisdom of God" (Ephesians 3:10). I think there is little doubt that this reference to principalities and powers includes the unfallen celestial bodies, and not only the diabolical ones. I do not know that angels of Satan need instructing about the manifold wisdom of God, but God is revealing Himself in a wonderful way to His own angel ministers by what He is doing through the Church. I cannot understand that; I cannot comprehend that; it is far beyond me. But there is the statement. It is a clear declaration that God is teaching principalities and powers concerning Himself by His activities in the Church; which means that there is a realm of spiritual intelligence, very high spiritual intelligence, angelic intelligence, receiving instruction through the Church. For what, I do not know, but it represents some tremendous values. It evidently represents something of great meaning.

Very often it may seem but poor comfort to us in times of suffering, times of trial, times of adversity, times when Satan is pressing hard, to be told that, while we can see nothing of the meaning of all this, God is instructing angels, and that principalities and powers are deriving the benefit of it all. We do not draw a great deal of comfort from that, but if we understood I think we would realise that, while we may not at such times be fulfilling a very big ministry on the earth, there is a big ministry going on towards principalities and powers through our instrumentality. Do not think that running about taking meetings, and doing work for the Lord, is the only kind of ministry that members of the Church can fulfil. Ministry may be equally being fulfilled when these things have been brought to a standstill, and all earthly activities for the Lord stopped, and we are in one of these painful periods of inaction. Do not conclude that because of such inaction no ministry is being rendered, or that everything of that kind is cut off at such a time. Here is the word: "... that NOW unto the principalities and the powers in heavenly places might be made known through the Church the manifold wisdom of God" - not in the coming age, but now. They are learning from the Lord, by reason of those very difficult and trying experiences through which the Lord is taking us, what He is doing in the Church.

Supposing the principalities and powers, these angelic ministers that wait upon Him, should one day come to us and thank us very much for going through that dark time, and say: 'I came to know a lot through that. I came to understand the wisdom of God in a wonderful way through that bad time which you had.' You would be surprised, would you not? You would say: 'Well, I never imagined that anything could come out of that! I thought everything was dried up, and that nothing was happening at all.' Oh, that angel minister would say: 'You were very mistaken. I was getting a great deal of benefit out of your bad time.' That is not a flight of imagination. Surely that is the logical outworking of a statement like this. There is a ministry that the Church fulfils which is altogether apart from platforms and meetings and the numerous kinds of activity as here amongst men. There is a mighty ministry which reaches out and touches the fringes of the

universe. God is doing something out there through His dealings with the Church here. That is a ministry in which we do well to desire to be. Remember that unfallen angels know nothing in their experience of grace. Grace - marvellous grace - is something which they can only know by observing it at work.

#### "PREACHED AMONG THE NATIONS"

I think we need not tarry with that. The Church's ministry is to be in all the nations, and its ministry is Christ in all the nations. Its testimony to Him is to be in all the nations.

#### "BELIEVED ON IN THE WORLD"

That certainly was true of the Lord Jesus. John 17 says: "... the words which thou gavest me I have given unto them; and they received them, and knew of a truth that I came forth from thee, and they believed that thou didst send me" (verse 8). He was believed on in the world.

In verse 21 we have the words: "That they may all be one... that the world may believe..." There is a believing on the part of the world as a result of His being in the Church. I am quite certain that the Church will not be believed on, or believed in, until, and unless, there is a manifestation of the spirit of Christ in mutual love. The world is put back from Christ so much by failure in that direction. While we may view the situation as hopeless in general, that does not excuse us from standing for a true testimony, and realizing that faith in the Lord Jesus will be begotten by the expression of His love amongst ourselves.

#### "RECEIVED UP IN GLORY"

That was true of Him, and, blessed be God, that is going to be true of His Church, His Body. 1 Corinthians 15 gives us a grand revelation: "We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump..." We shall be caught up to meet the Lord in the air. That may not be so far ahead as many people think. It may be very soon: the sooner the better so far as His people are concerned. Our hearts really do say from their depths: "Even so, come, Lord Jesus." There is no hypocrisy about that. There was a time when we used to be scared of the thought, but we have come to see that His coming is the way of all hope. This world will never see a better state, but an increasingly worse condition, until the events subsequent to, and consequent upon, His coming have taken place. There is coming an age when every evil thing will be blotted out from this cosmos. Wars shall be no more. Strife shall be no more. Hatred shall be no more. Sin shall be no more. Pain shall be no more. Sorrow and tears shall be no more. Death shall be no more. Oh, what a day! What an age! We can hardly imagine it, but our hearts surely leap at the thought of it.

Do you say you are afraid of that? Do you dread to think of that? The Lord must come for His Church first, and then things will rapidly hasten to that day. It may be a very terrible passage. Things may become very awful in the earth for a while after the Church has gone, but things will happen very rapidly, and very vividly, and move on toward that great day when He makes a new heaven and a new earth. But the day of the Church's being received up into glory is imminent. No one who knows His Bible and has spiritual perception, or even good common-sense with the Bible before him, can fail to see that that day hastens. The counsels of men are being blown to pieces by God. They cannot hold their decisions together for a week or two. Their most solid decisions, and intentions, and agreements, fall to pieces within a short time. God bringing the counsels of men to naught, but the counsels of God, says His Word, stand for ever. In the eternal counsels of God this is one of the things determined: "... we... shall... be caught up in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air..." (1 Thessalonians 4:17). "Received up in glory"! His end is going to be

our end. The Church is going to know the counterpart of her Lord as her Head in His experience of being received up in glory.

Now, it may be that some unsaved ones have been looking in at the window and have become envious. Are you going to stand outside? Do you want to be apart from all this? Why, here is a revelation of Divine calling. Here is a presentation of the Word of God as to what it is that has been made possible for you by the Cross of the Lord Jesus, if you will believe. Are you going to let it all go? Surely you are wanting to draw near! Surely you are wanting to come in! Surely those on the fringe of things will want to be more in! Surely all of us will want to be more faithful, more devoted in the light of that day which at longest cannot now be far off. God's Word has always been fulfilled, and proved true, and this will not break down; this will be equally true.

The Lord draw us right into the purpose of our calling! There is very much more which could be said on this matter, but we have said enough to see that the mystery of Christ is carried over into the Church which is His Body in all these respects, and that a part of the mystery - such a mystery to the men of the world, to the unbeliever, to the one who does not know spiritual secrets - is the translation of His waiting Church to meet Him ere He comes again to the earth. Translation to glory is ridiculed and ruled out as a fantastic idea by the world. But those who know the mystery of being born again; who know the mystery of being preserved and kept by Christ through the intensity of well-nigh universal opposition and antagonism, who know also that it is not in themselves at all to keep on, but that it is the Lord alone who so enables, He Himself being their very life - those of us who know these mysteries find no difficulty in accepting that extra part of the mystery related to the consummation of our lives, namely, to be caught up, received up in glory. It is a strange thing that men of the world can accept as commonplace today things which at one time they would have laughed at: radio, flight, television, moon visits, and all such things. Had you spoken of such things a century or two ago men would have mocked. Jules Verne was regarded as a sort of wonder man at one time, but all that he forecast has come true. Things he spoke of are commonplace today. Men will believe these things, yet they cannot credit the translation from this earth to the presence of God of a company whom He has redeemed. We are looking for it, and we are hastening unto it, and we shall hail it with joy. The cry is in our hearts: "Even so, come, Lord Jesus."

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