

# The Centrality and Supremacy of Christ to the Church Which Is His Body

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The centrality and supremacy of Christ to the Church is essential for living a corporate life with other believers and for coming to the full apprehension and growth in Christ.*

**Scripture:** Ephesians 1:19, Colossians 1:18

**Topics:** "Unity in Christ", "The Body of Christ"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the centrality and supremacy of Christ as the Head of the Church, His Body, highlighting that true unity and victory over division stem from His resurrection. He explains that individual believers must recognize their connection to the Body, as independence contradicts Christ's headship and undermines the Church's purpose. The Body of Christ represents God's victory over the spirit of independence introduced by Satan, and it is essential for full apprehension, growth, and manifestation of Christ. Sparks warns against the limitations of individualism, urging believers to embrace corporate life in Christ for true spiritual fulfillment and victory. Ultimately, he calls for a collective recognition of Christ's supremacy to overcome the disintegrating work of the enemy.

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## Transcript

Reading: 1 Chronicles 28:1-21; Colossians 1:18.

The second realm of the centrality and supremacy of the Lord Jesus Christ is that of the Body, the Church. First of all let us take note of exactly what is said in this verse. "He is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the pre-eminence." That translation: "... who is the beginning" is hardly sufficient; the more complete and literal translation there would be: "In that he is the beginning." It helps you to understand what is being said here; reading it like that you will at once come into the fuller apprehension of the truth. "He is the head of the body, the church, in that he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead." So you see that here the Church is related to Christ by His resurrection: "In that he is the firstborn from the dead." He is the Head of the Body, the Church in His resurrection.

RESURRECTION AND HEADSHIP

The Headship is two-fold; it is as to place. He occupies the supreme place; and it is as to time; that place was occupied by Him in relation to the Body, the Church, in His resurrection. So that the headship of Christ over the Body, the Church, is by His resurrection. That represents more than may appear for the moment, but I think you will see, as we go on, the greater and fuller context. Now having said so much about the headship of Christ, or His centrality and supremacy in the life of the individual believer, we must recognize that the individual headship of Christ is not, so far as the believer is concerned, an independent authority.

It is relative; that is, in other words, there are not so many heads as there are believers, constituting every believer a single entity authority, making of every believer an independent authority. While the headship must be established in every individual believer, there is only one headship and not ten thousand times ten thousand, or a great multitude which no man can number. One Head: which means that everything is relative and the very thought of the Body is that of a unity under one Head.

The idea, the conception of a body clearly represents the idea of a unity under one head. The individual supremacy of Christ will lead to the spirit and principle of the Body. I mean that if Christ is central and supreme really in the individual life of believers, the natural, the spontaneous, the inevitable outworking of that will be the principle of the Body. If Christ dwells in your heart by faith - that was one phase of the individual centrality and supremacy of Christ which we considered - if Christ dwells in your individual heart through faith, it leads to the next part of the verse: "... that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be strong to apprehend with all the saints...."

Christ dwelling in the individual heart immediately leads to "all saints." The principle of the Body comes out of the establishing of the centrality and supremacy or headship of Christ in the individual. There is a contradiction, beloved, if it is claimed by anyone that Christ is supreme in the heart and in the life and yet such a one be marked and characterized by personal and independent action and interest. There is a violent contradiction there. Christ cannot be absolutely supreme in the individual life and there be a personal independent activity and interest.

If anyone is a law unto himself in spirit - although he would never say that of himself - if his life takes the feature of being something detached, something separate, something independent, something apart from the rest of the Lord's people, a watertight compartment, there is a contradiction there, Christ is not supreme, Christ is not central. These two things cannot be reconciled, independence and the Body; independence and the supremacy of the Lord Jesus; because He is supreme in the life as a Head, but not merely as the Head of an individual but the Head of the Body, one Head of all. The Body, as that which issues with the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, reverses the very spirit of independence.

#### THE BODY OF CHRIST REPRESENTS HIS VICTORY

We must see that the Body of Christ represents a tremendous victory. That Body comes out of His resurrection, or with His resurrection, and the pre-eminent example of the exercise of Divine power in this universe is in the raising of Jesus Christ from the dead, or from among the dead. That raising of Christ from among the dead, representing the supreme exercise of Divine power, represents the mighty victory of God in Christ, and if the Body of Christ comes out with and in His resurrection, that Body is a part of an expression of that mighty victory of God.

Now Ephesians makes that perfectly clear and says that actually: "... the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward 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 heavenlies." The Body of Christ is the mighty victory of God in Christ in its realization. What was the nature of that victory? Over what was it a victory? It was over that spirit which came into the universe and found concrete, direct expression in bringing about schism, division, disintegration in the universe.

Everything was held as a whole in God. It was one thing in Him. He, in eternity past, summed up everything in His Son, the Lord Jesus, that in Him all things should hold together, subsist; should be a corporate whole bound together in a oneness in the Son of His love. When Lucifer, Satan, saw the pre-eminent position and the transcendent glory of God's Son, he aspired to occupy a position even above that, to have something even above that, and so he broke away from that relativity of things in the Head, and in an independence of spirit, and action, and motive he sought to have things for himself apart from the Head Divinely appointed.

The outworking of that in heaven brought schism there, a breach; the unity of heaven was broken, and angels kept not their first estate and were cast out and are reserved in everlasting chains. The unity of heaven was broken. But Lucifer brought that spirit down into the creation; and whereas God had given to man all things to have in Himself (in His secret which He had not yet revealed to the ages, His secret, His mystery, His unrevealed heart secret concerning His Son), Lucifer again, the Adversary, provoked, prompted, tempted, lured man to have it for himself out of relation to God, and man moved in an independence of God, acted again in an independent spirit, a self spirit, to have things not in God but in himself.

Thus in this earth the schism of heaven had a counterpart; the unity of things in God was broken into, and from that time the principle of the fallen race is independence, self-direction, self-realization, self-possession; the flesh is just that, and that lies back of the whole terrible history of the revolt in heaven and the wreckage in earth. There is no unity until Christ comes, God in Christ. The Adversary has to meet God in Christ on this issue, and when God raised Him from the dead and brought with Him - as the Firstborn from among the dead - the Church, the Body, He secured His answer to all that work of the Devil; and the Church, the Body of Christ, represents God's victory over the disintegrating, dividing, schismatic work of the Devil.

Oh yes, that is true in spite of everything. Ever since this, what he did at the beginning and always has done he has pursued with unabated energy, that is, slandering God, and he has tried to slander God since the resurrection of the Lord Jesus by the work which he has done among men, working upon flesh, even amongst Christians, to bring about schisms and divisions; carnality is behind it all. The enemy has done that, and in so doing he has sought to establish a contradiction to God's victory. But beloved, the unity is not in us, it is in Christ; the unity is not our unity, it is the unity of Christ. The unity is in a person. Now you see the necessity for Christ to be central and supreme.

#### CHRIST - THE UNIFYING CENTRE AND OBJECT

As we have said before, if we have got any other interest that we are trying to further, something that we call a testimony, perhaps meaning by that a system of teaching, or a fellowship, or a denomination, or the contrary, the opposite, any of these things, well, the history will be still more divisions, it is bound to be. If it is Christ, only Christ, central and supreme, we have got the answer to the Devil; we have got the secret of victory, we have got the secret of fellowship, we have the power of His resurrection. Oh, how important it is for us to see that the Body represents His victory. The Body is His victory in the sense that it is the

reversing of all independence, and that independence of spirit or action is a violation not only of the truth of the Body of Christ, but of the power of His resurrection. Now that carries you a long way. Fail to recognize that and you have not got the secret of victory over death and the power of the Devil. Isn't that exactly what the Apostle said to the Corinthians? "... not discerning the Lord's body. For this cause many are weak and sickly among you, and many sleep" some die. Not all sickness and death, of course, is to be accounted for by failure to recognize the Body of Christ, but the Holy Spirit does put His finger upon that, and says that a very great deal can be accounted for by that. That sickness might have been handled and dealt with; that death, that taking away, might have been unnecessary if there had been a recognition of that for which the Body of Christ stands and an employing of the practical value of corporate life among the saints. "Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord." Elders - why? Why that? That is the recognition of the corporate principle, that is the recognition of the Body of Christ. Those elders are only representatives of the Body, and it is bringing the Body in, representatively, and that Body represents His victory, and if the enemy is back of this thing, well, it is through His Body as Head that He operates against the enemy. We may be suffering a great deal more than we need suffer because we have failed to see the Divine order. The enemy may be making much more havoc than he ought to be, because we have failed to apply the Divine means. We have kept the thing to ourselves and we have not drawn the Body in representatively, we have not made this a corporate matter. Individualism may rob us of a great deal in every realm.

#### INDEPENDENT LIFE CONTRARY TO GOD'S WILL

But what I was saying was, that the Body reverses independence, and we violate some of the great revelations of God when there is independence, separateness, when we just drive our own chariot and plough our own furrow, and do not recognize that we are a part of a whole. All that horrible work that the enemy has done is reversed by the Lord Jesus, and the outworking of His reversing of that work is through the Body, the Church. That is His instrument in resurrection for making known, through this age and the ages to come, the mighty victory over all the disintegrating work of Satan's independent action and spirit which he has introduced into the race.

But this thing is very deeply rooted in us; the subtlety, the imperceptible desire of the flesh for gratification. If we were asked straight out whether we wanted to please ourselves, whether we were after our own personal gratification, whether it was our pleasure and satisfaction that was motivating our lives and directing us, we would at once most vehemently repudiate the suggestion, and probably be very offended with whoever made the suggestion; and yet, beloved, deeper than our deepest honesty, deeper than our truest sincerity, there is that subtle constituent of fallen nature which so often unperceived by the believer himself or herself does just love to be gratified, personally satisfied, and which does not like to be emptied out and have nothing.

Gratification and glory is the very essence of the flesh even when we are engaged in the Lord's work. To set up something FOR THE LORD, yes, but men point at it and say: "That is his work and her work," and how we like that! Something that will be a good testimony to faith, a great monument - yes, but subtly the monument to OUR faith. Such is this horrible thing that is always reaching out from beneath, under cover, and, quietly and imperceptibly, taking the glory of the Lord to itself.

The remedy for that is the Body of Christ practically applied in principle. Yes, it is! That is why it is so difficult to live a corporate life with other believers, because you have to be so thoroughly crucified. There is nothing that demands crucifixion more than to live with other Christians all your days. You say: "That is

a terrible thing to say," but you know what I am talking about. You have to defer, refer, consult, submit, let go. In a thousand and one ways you have to put your own likes and dislikes aside if the Lord is to get His end.

Oh yes, it is the Body of Christ that is the saving thing. It is corporate life that is the remedy, but O beloved, that is the way of triumph, the way of victory. It is! It is a mighty remedy for the flesh, a mighty remedy for the work of the Devil, but it does represent the mighty power of God working in us. You see, you can never come into the Body of Christ until you have been crucified. It is because uncrucified flesh has impinged upon the corporate life of believers that there is such contradiction and denial, because the Body represents the exclusion of man, in himself - flesh.

#### THE BODY NECESSARY TO FULL APPREHENSION OF CHRIST

Now the Body is essential to full apprehension and growth and expression. The body is essential to full apprehension. No individual, and no number of isolated and detached individuals, can come to the full apprehension of Christ. The Lord has constructed the whole thing upon that principle. You think of all the range of the people of God being standardized, say, to one mind. You say: "That would be an awful outlook." It would! I mean this, the very fact that the Lord has so constituted us differently every one of us, makes possible the varied aspect of apprehension which is its own peculiar contribution. And I am able to say: "Well, the Lord has shown you THAT I did not see THAT but it is splendid"; I profit by that. And you are able to say: "Well that never came to me, but thank the Lord I can profit by that." And so it is the whole Body that is necessary unto the full apprehension of Christ. The Apostle's prayer is that we "... may be strong to apprehend with all the saints..."; it takes all the saints to apprehend, and we lose a very great deal when we are detached, isolated, separated spiritually.

#### THE BODY NECESSARY TO FULL GROWTH IN CHRIST

The Body is necessary to fullness of apprehension, also to growth, because it is the Body that grows up, that is built up, and buildeth itself up until it comes to the full measure of the stature of a man in Christ. You and I individually will never reach the full measure of that stature. I am never promised that I shall reach the full measure of Christ, personally, but as a member, a limb, or even a little tiny corpuscle in this great spiritual organism, with all the rest I can come to His fullness. It will take all the rest to come to His fullness, and insofar as I am detached I am limited, straitened. Insofar as I come into the fellowship of the Body and recognize the Lord's way, I am enlarged in the measure of Christ.

#### THE BODY NECESSARY TO FULL MANIFESTATION OF CHRIST

In the expression of Christ the same thing holds good. Is He going to manifest Himself against the enemy? Well, beloved, I shall have very little hope against the enemy in a detached capacity; but if I can bring in the Body, even if it is only in two or three gathered into His Name, that represents the Body, and the principle of the Body in function and representation is there; (and the Lord binds Himself up with a principle) He is in the midst. The Lord's irreducible minimum for His Body is two, not one. Bring in the Body even by its minimum representation and the Lord recognizes the full value of the Body, and for manifestation it is in fullness through the Body. That is why alone we are so often brought to a standstill; why so often it is hopeless for us to try and get through until we draw in co-operation. The Lord holds us to that. But if you can get the Lord's people in a larger, fuller way into the real spiritual apprehension of the headship of Christ in relation to the Body, how much greater will be the potency of the impact of Christ in manifestation over against the enemy, and before men. The Body is necessary for the manifestation of

Christ in fullness, and that is the Divinely determined method of the full manifestation of Christ in the ages to come. The headship of the Lord Jesus demands the Body. Not so many detached individuals, but the Body; because a head implies a body, demands a body.

## INDIVIDUALISM IS LIMITATION AND WEAKNESS

Now I think I can close this phase for the moment; and in doing so, let me stress once more the certain limitation which must be associated with mere individualism and detachment and independence. There may be a very great deal accomplished by independent action, apparently; you can see things and people which are independent, detached, and you can see a very great deal apparently being done. Now in spite of that, I say most emphatically that that does not get where God wants it to get.

It may be a wide surface but a superficial one, without depth. It may only get just so far in spiritual things, and not get any further. It may reach the point of conversions; but conversions, beloved, are not God's end, they are only God's beginning. There may be much in that realm, praise God, but while we rejoice at every conversion and every bit of work that results in conversions, have we not come to see that there is infinitely more than that in the will of God? The tragedy is that so many who have been led to the Lord have not been taken on, and have either stuck or they have gone back simply because their being brought to the Lord was not upon an adequate presentation of the fullness of Christ.

It was upon the basis of their being saved; but Christ did not come into His place as supreme, sovereign Lord and Head, and very often you have to go over the ground again and again simply because there has been a stopping short. Well, you can have a great deal of activity and apparent result - my point is not that that is without value, but it is this, that invariably and inevitably, there is always limitation, if we do not go on to see that the Body of Christ represents His fullness, and not individual Christian life or work.

It is not our individual service for the Lord, it is the service of the Body with which we are joined, that leads to fullness. There will be weakness, limitation - ah, yes, and more than that, there will be exposure to error along the line of mere individualism, exposure to error, and a falling into error. Have we not seen this again and again? Things becoming marked by clear misleading, confusion, a having to take back positions and statements, and a confessing that a mistake was made, and the calculations were all wrong because there was something that was independent, individual in that thing.

We need the covering of the headship of Christ in His Body amongst His saints to save us from that. You may take it - you will prove it to be so in the outworking - that mere individual independence in the life and service of the Lord will sooner or later bring to a point of limitation, and an element of contradiction and confusion will come in there. It is bound to be. To enquire in His House is the way of the ordered guidance of the Lord. You are struggling to get an independent guidance from the Lord and a whole lot of contradictions are coming in; you really do not know where you are and what is right.

The Lord is not going to give you that which will constitute you a law unto yourself in relation to Him, He is going to give it to you in relation to His main purpose. Share it with the Lord's children, bring in those whom the Lord has provided to be fellows, and in that multitude of counselors you will find wisdom. In the Lord's way you will find clearness.

You see the principle is a clear one and it just comes right back to the point where we started. It is not making the Body everything - God forbid! It is seeing that the Lord Jesus, as head of the Body, brings us under His headship for protection, for guidance, for fullness, for everything, and we recognize that we are

members of a Body and we are not individual units merely. This is a relative thing. We come to enjoy all that is in Christ, and that Christ is as Head, Sovereign, in relation to the saints, in fellowship with the saints, and not in some detached line of our own. We want the Lord's full support? We get it relatively and not independently.

May the Lord help you to accept His Word, to lay it up in your heart, because I am quite sure that here is the way of a fullness which we may not have known, coming into what the Lord Jesus is by Divine appointment, in greater measure. It is this way. The Lord give us grace to let go our love to be free and independent, and to be crucified to that flesh, brought to live under His sovereignty, to Him as supreme.

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