

The Church and the World

by T. Austin-Sparks

The church's power and influence come from its separation from the world and its focus on Christ.

Scripture: John 17:14

Topics: "Separation from the World", "The Church's Influence"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the church's relationship with the world, highlighting that the world is inherently hostile to God and that Christians must overcome its influence. He explains that the 'world' refers not to the physical realm or people, but to a nature and system that opposes God, which has been corrupted by sin and Satan. Sparks warns against the dangers of worldliness, which he defines as a mindset that prioritizes material and temporal concerns over spiritual values. He asserts that true power in the church comes from its separation from the world and reliance on Christ, who provides the necessary strength to resist worldly temptations. Ultimately, the church's influence is rooted in its distinctiveness and commitment to Christ, rather than conformity to worldly standards.

Transcript

In our quest for the secrets of the power in the church "As it was in the beginning" -- that is, in the years immediately subsequent to the great Pentecost -- it is inevitable that we come to its relationship to the world. This inevitability is forced upon us both by its spirit and conduct and by the large place of reference to the world in the New Testament writings. The Lord Himself is recorded as having some very strong things to say about the world. John in his gospel uses the word seventy-seven times. In chapter seventeen alone it occurs fifteen times. In his letters it is used some twenty-one times. In Corinthians it is found twenty-two times, and it is referred to in almost every other letter.

Concerning the world, it is said:

1. That it is something that Christ had to overcome, and which He said that He had overcome.
2. That in its entirety it lies in the wicked one, and has a Prince.
3. That it is hostile and inimical to God, and that to be its friend is to be the enemy of God.
4. That it is something out of which Christians have been taken, and are prayed for that, although in it, they may be kept from it.

5. That it lies under condemnation and is to be destroyed.

Many more things are said about it, but we do not propose to enter into an analysis of the word itself or the difference in Greek words translated into this one word "world".

But some may perhaps quote John 3:16, over against the above: "God so loved the world...". This great Scripture indicates the real meaning of what we are going to say. There is really no contradiction. In order to understand the contrast we have to ask the question: What is this thing that is so out of favour with God and on the other hand, what is it that God so loved?

As to the first question it can be said at once that, in this sense of disfavour, "world" does not mean the framework, the sphere, the material and geographical structure. Neither does it essentially mean the people within that structure. God does not hate mankind! "World" must therefore mean something other, and we can perhaps indicate this by certain terms such as: a nature, a disposition, a mentality, a system, a constitution, a way! It is in all this that what is alien, hostile, and contrary to God is inherent.

The "world" in this respect is outlawed by God because foreign to His own nature and constitution. It is here that this whole matter of worldliness rests. This matter has suffered lamentably from over-simplification, and has resulted in many people being put into a false position.

For instance, worldliness has been made a question of where people go (theatres, cinemas, dances, etc., etc.), or how they dress and behave and talk. It has been said that to become a Christian such things must be abandoned and certain other things **MUST** take their place. Pamphlets have been written on: Should a Christian go to the theatre? -- Smoke? -- Drink alcoholic drink? -- Use make up? and so forth. This is to miss the point entirely and can become as legalistic as Judaism. Really, in all this, no less a point is missed than that of the new birth itself, which, if genuine, -- resulting in the indwelling Spirit and life of God -- will answer all such questions **FROM WITHIN**.

Let us look more closely at this term "world" in the light of the Bible.

1. The World is a Nature

If, as we have noted, the world is hostile to God, and God to it, if it is something to be "overcome", and from which the Christian must be separated, if friendship with it constitutes those concerned "enemies of God", then there **MUST** be something **VERY** evil about it, and what is more evil than Satan himself? The Bible represents Satan as having become "the **PRINCE** of this **WORLD**" and its "god" by the **CONSENT** and conquest of man, to whom the created earth was committed as a trust.

But let it be clearly understood that this change of government was no mere "official" and formal thing, so that Satan came to rule merely from an external position. He captured mind, heart, and will and inoculated man's soul with his own nature. Man's nature was changed. What is that nature?

All-inclusively it is shown to be rivalry with God, that is:

- (a). To take the place of God.
- (b). To take God's rights from Him and not let God be everything.
- (c). To be independent of God and **SELF-sufficient**, knowing better, able to do better, or to do without God.

(d). To be possessed of power, to control, to master, to rule, to be superior; a revolt against subjection and servanthood.

This is the nature with which, in greater or lesser degree, humanity has been impregnated. The heart of this whole issue is "selfhood", rather than "Godhood". How does it work out?

(a). It makes much more of the material and temporal than it does of the spiritual.

With God all things are viewed from the standpoint of spiritual value. That is His very nature. God is a Spirit, not impersonal, but a spiritual person. The significance of persons in the Bible, and even after, is the measure of the spiritual effect and fruit of their lives and work.

Satan will absorb and obsess with the material and temporal in order to rob of the spiritual or to squeeze it out.

(b). It makes everything of the present and blinds to the eternal.

What we have and can get NOW is the main consideration. This life is everything! This is the real; the eternal is unreal to the natural man.

This is a great point on which Satan tempted Christ and offered Him the world. On this point Jesus overcame the world! In the world the SEEN is what matters; the natural senses of perception and evaluation wholly govern. The standard of success is that of what can be shown.

In many other ways the nature of this world is in contrast to that of God; its standards, its point of view, its values, its aims, its thoughts, its ways, its spirit. One of the greatest features in Christian spiritual education is that of learning how altogether different are God's thoughts, standards of values and ways from our own.

2. The World is a Prison

The keeper of that prison is Satan himself.

The Bible represents the souls of men as in captivity, in bondage, in fetters, in prison, in the power of Satan. It represents Christ as the anointed Redeemer breaking into the world to "proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound". He is the Stronger than the strong man keeping his house!

The escape or deliverance of a soul from the world is fraught with very intense conflict, and forever after it is a battle to keep free of its influence, its power and its down-drag.

3. The World is a Lie

As man was at first trapped by a lie, so he remains the victim of what is false. The more a person has of this world, the greater the disillusionment at the end. Its pleasures are a deceitful stream which will fail at last. Its riches bring no deep heart satisfaction, and the soul goes out as naked as it came in.

Jesus said that to gain the whole world at the expense of the soul is no bargain. The subtlety by which man was first captured was in the fact that the TRUTH as to the ultimate result was not disclosed but hidden. Jesus left the people of His day in no doubt that they were blind and demonstrated it by miracles,

that is by acts which only GOD could do.

There are degrees of blindness. There is the natural blindness which is universal, but which can be remedied by the grace and power of God. And there is the double blindness of prejudice and pride added to nature, which is fatal. Such was the blindness of the ruling religious class of Christ's time and it cost them everything of hope.

All that we have said and all that it implies can be tested by history and for Christians by experience.

"In the beginning" the church knew all this, stood in the truth of it and taught it. Moreover, the Holy Spirit made this very real. In those days a spiritual complicity with the world was disastrous. When those who had marketable goods and properties were turning them to account for the furtherance of the Gospel, there were two who took advantage of the "going" to get profit for themselves. They took hold of the commercial element of the world and linked it with the things of heaven. It is later declared to be something put into the heart by Satan. The result was disastrous for them, and the swift visitation of judgment laid down for all time the principle that commercialism in divine things is fatal.

It was because of the allowed invasion of the world into the churches that their judgment was effected, as recorded in Revelation, and in some cases the lampstand removed. The great deception which is costing the church so much power is, that in order to influence the world, it is necessary to be one with it, to come down to its level; to employ its methods, to use its means and to remove all distinctiveness between the church and itself. The truth is that the church's power over the world is in proportion to its separation from it. The question of attraction is to be answered along the line of a perfectly joyous and satisfied church without any of the world's playthings. This, we have seen demonstrated. There is a magnetism about the joy and enjoyment of wholly committed and consecrated Christians which makes the world's methods vain.

So it was "in the beginning" despite persecution, ostracism, and much adversity. The secret of the early power and growth of the church was the greatness of the new world which had been opened in Christ, and the church's entrance therein. Christ ENTIRELY filled their bill, and they needed no plus. What it meant was the greatness of Christ and their apprehension thereof.

Their independence of the world was their power over it. The sufficiency of Christ made that independence. It intrigued the world, led to enquiry, investigation and wistfulness, even if it did provoke the prince of this world to bitter jealousy and antagonism.

The church may have to travel a long way back to recover its power and influence, but there is no alternative and the world will prove its undoing, disillusionment, and shame.

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