

The Continuation of the Conflict in Relation to the Church as the Corporate Company

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Church must be a heavenly Body, living on a spiritual level, in order to express the fullness of Christ and to be effective in its witness.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 3:1

Topics: "The Church's Identity", "Spiritual Warfare"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the ongoing spiritual conflict faced by the Church and individual believers, highlighting the battle for the manifestation of spiritual life against forces of spiritual death. He contrasts the earthly struggles depicted in 1 Corinthians with the heavenly realities presented in Ephesians, illustrating how the Church must rise above worldly influences to fully express the life of Christ. The sermon calls for believers to understand the significance of the Cross and the power of the resurrection, urging them to embrace their identity as a heavenly people. Sparks stresses that true unity and order within the Church are essential for a powerful testimony against spiritual forces. Ultimately, he challenges the Church to abandon earthly ties and embrace its calling to a higher spiritual realm.

Transcript

We have said enough to make it abundantly clear that there is an age-long battle for spiritual life, and that, if that life can be arrested in its manifestation, its expression, it will be so arrested. There is a great power and force working by the instrument of spiritual death to quench the testimony of the risen and ascended Lord within the individual believer, and within the Church as the Body of Christ. The individual believer and the Church are together in that battle for the manifestation of that life of the Lord. The issue is not as to the forfeiture of Divine, eternal life, nor as to whether Satan can take that life away from us, but as to the keeping of it from its full expression in believers individually and in the Church as a whole. That is the battle in which we are more or less engaged and concerned, according to the measure of our spirituality and our utterness for the Lord. What is true of the individual, then, is true of the whole Body.

THE HIGHER REALMS OF THE BATTLE AND THE TESTIMONY

I think we can best get to the inside of this matter by noting the contrast between the first letter to the Corinthians and the letter to the Ephesians. By this means we shall be greatly helped in understanding the nature and realm of the battle for spiritual life. There are many practical suggestions and presentations in

these two letters by which we can be governed in this matter. To begin with, let us note the realms in which these letters stand; for undoubtedly there is a great difference between them in this respect. We are familiar with the governing clauses of the letter to the Ephesians. The phrase "in the heavenlies" is one of its dominating notes. We know quite well as soon as we take up the letter to the Ephesians that we are in the realm of the heavenlies. A great emancipation has taken place, a great lifting out, a great extrication, a great separation. One whole world has been left behind and another has been entered in a spiritual way, where things partake the utterness of the Lord, where the Lord is seen in a full way as Sovereign Head over all things to the Church. Here there is nothing fragmentary, nothing partial, nothing imperfect, but everything is viewed as complete, full and final, and as linked in a perfect way with the Lord in heaven. Here all the expressions are heavenly expressions. It is a realm, and the testimony is there seen in true heavenly character and vigour. We mean that the testimony is operating in a heavenly realm. It is in those ultimate relationships which are spiritual, with forces and intelligences which are supernatural, which are more than human, and more than the forces and intelligences of this earth, that the testimony is seen to be operating. The testimony is reaching the ultimate ranges of this universe, is touching principalities and powers, world rulers of this darkness, spiritual hosts of wickedness. It is there that something is being registered. It is back there that the testimony is being established fulfilled and expressed.

We cannot get further back than that. It goes behind everything seen, everything handled, everything known here, and it touches that realm which is responsible for all that is going on here.

Turn to the first letter to the Corinthians, and see into what a different realm you enter. You find very little that is heavenly there. You find that immediately you begin to move into this letter you are touching the earthlies, mundane, natural things - and what a mass of such things there is! There is none of the atmosphere of the heavenlies here. You find yourself down in somewhat sordid things, even amongst the Lord's people. Sordid is not too strong a word in some connections. You are having to deal with all the unpleasantness, all the wretched aspects of mixture and spiritual weakness and immaturity, and be occupied with things which you would fain sweep aside and have done with. You feel as you move here: 'Oh, that we could get out of this realm of things; divisions, schisms and quarrellings, lawsuits and whatnot! How earthly it is!' It is another realm altogether, and because it is so earthly, because there is such an absence of the heavenly, you are not surprised that the testimony is so poor. You can find here no trace of registration upon spiritual forces. If you read this first letter to the Corinthians from an entirely spiritual standpoint, you have to say that the situation is rather one where the evil forces have gained an advantage than of their having been overthrown. You have to admit that the enemy is running roughshod here amongst the saints. He seems in some things to be having his way altogether, and carrying things into a realm which it is a shame to speak of even in the world. Yes, it is true that the enemy is no defeated foe, so far as these believers are concerned, or so far as the situation in this letter is concerned. He is having too much of his own way, simply because they are so much on the earthly level of things.

That speaks for itself, does it not? The testimony, for its real value and effectiveness, demands that the Lord's people, the Church, be a heavenly Body. It demands that! It is clear that these believers at Corinth had come into a very small measure of the power of His resurrection, simply because they had not entered into the meaning of His death, His Cross. It is a sad and painful reflection that the Apostle should have to remind them of the opportunity that had been theirs by what he says in the opening section of this letter: "And I, brethren, when I came unto you, came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom... I was with you in weakness and in fear, and in much trembling. I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified." That had been Paul's attitude and message and aim when he went

to Corinth some considerable time before he wrote the letter. Now, his having been amongst them, stressing, emphasizing Jesus Christ and Him crucified, and nothing else, and then much later writing such a letter, exhibits the fact that they had not learned that for which he had been there!

If there is a living apprehension of Jesus Christ, and Him crucified, you will not have divisions like this, nor schisms, fornication, and all these things. They had missed the meaning of the Cross. They had failed to apprehend the message upon which the Apostle had laid such undivided and such exclusive stress in his presence amongst them. And if they do not know the meaning of the Cross, how can they know the meaning of the resurrection? How can they know the power of the resurrection? And if they do not know that, then how can they know the power of that resurrection-life registering the impact of the risen, living Lord upon spiritual forces? You can never undo divisions among the saints by bringing saints together to discuss their differences, and to ask them to make them up. The only way in which such things can be dealt with amongst the Lord's people is to get down on your knees and deal with the forces behind. The power of the enemy behind that thing has to be broken. You can never patch up a situation like that, because it is devilish.

What is true in the matter of divisions is true in every other matter in this letter. It is the enemy behind who is ultimately the occasion of all this disorder, and there is nothing but the impact of a risen, ascended, sovereign Lord against the enemy behind which will make for a better state of things. All this is made very evident in Corinth. They could not register that impact upon spiritual forces because they were not in the right realm. That is a heavenly realm of activity and they were on the earth, amongst the earthlies. The realm makes a lot of difference to the testimony.

If you are trying to operate in the power of the testimony of the ascended and reigning Lord, and are living an earthly life, you are going to be absolutely worsted and proved completely insufficient for the situation. If we are really going to have the coming through of the power of His throne, then we must be severed in a spiritual way from this world, from this earth. We must be, in a spiritual sense, a heavenly people seated together with Him in the heavenlies, blessed with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies, and so on. The realm is important for the testimony's functioning.

It is to this testimony that we are called. This is not some ideal impossible of realization. This is not something presented as a high level of truth. This is the thing for which the Church is constituted. I do not believe, as some people seem to believe, that the Church in Corinth and the Church in Ephesus are two different Churches. There is a teaching which says that the Body in Corinth is not the same Body as that in Ephesus. I do not believe that for a moment and I do not believe that the Corinthians there called for anything less than the Ephesians. It is the same calling. The Corinthians were as much called to a heavenly life and heavenly testimony as were the Ephesians, or any others. It is a matter of whether we accept the meaning of the Cross to bring us through into the power of His resurrection, and that will determine how far we shall be the expression of that ultimate power of the enthroned Lord.

That "realm" question touches any number of contingencies. It raises the whole question of whether we are living on an earthly level; whether we are officially bound up with something which, after all, is only earthly in its constitution, even though it be of a religious kind. All such questions as these are raised, and with them the issue as to whether we are out with the Lord in an emancipated, free, and clear way as His heavenly people. We are content to leave it there for the time, and you can ask the Lord to show you what it means in a fuller explanation to your own heart.

THE RANGE OF THE BATTLE AND THE TESTIMONY

Running parallel with the realm is what we may call the range of things; not so much the dimensions as the values, the qualities. Turn again to the Ephesian letter, and note some of the great words that are found in it. There are some wonderful statements, and phrases, and terms. "The exceeding greatness of his power", "Strengthened with all might by his Spirit in the inward man", "Able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us" - the power that worketh in us is capable of enabling us exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think - "Raised him... and made him to sit at his own right hand in the heavenly places far above all rule, and authority, and power, and dominion... and gave him to be head over all things to the church... the fulness of him that filleth all in all." Pick out all these transcendent, superlative things in the letter. Do not regard them just as words, just as oratory, but mark the tremendous range of value and calibre represented by these things. You have nothing to compare with them in the first letter to the Corinthians. If you turn to the chapter in that letter which perhaps carries you farthest in thought and revelation, the fifteenth chapter, you will find you are, after all, only dealing with resurrection, and that, the resurrection of the body; great and glorious things, it is true, as to the nature of the resurrection body. But when you have your resurrection body you are only then entering upon the great realm of the eternities. It may be a marvellous thing for this corruptible to put on incorruption, and I am quite sure we shall think it is a marvellous thing when it happens. It will be a glorious thing when the final touch of death with regard to our bodies is swallowed up victoriously. But we are only started on the career which is presented to us in the letter to the Ephesians for the ages to come. There are very vital things in the first letter to the Corinthians but in the range, in the depth and the height, the length and the breadth, so far as spiritual value is concerned, there is no comparison. Even when you deal with the Church, the Body, in 1 Corinthians 12, you are largely dealing with it from the side of its expression here. When you deal with it in the Ephesian letter you are carrying it higher, away from conditions where it is necessary to say such a thing as this: "One member cannot say to another, I have no need of you." How that reveals what had been the spirit of things at Corinth, and what an earthly level had obtained there! The Apostle, it is true, is giving an unfolding of spiritual relationships, but it is of such a kind as is largely occasioned, if not wholly, by spiritual disorder among the saints. But when you come into Ephesians 4 and touch the truth of the Body there, you are breathing an altogether different atmosphere.

Pass on to Ephesians 5:32: "This mystery is great: I speak in regard of Christ and of the church." You are carried away into the great mystery of the Body. That is something deeper. What is the explanation of this difference? It is not that they are two different Churches, nor that they represent two different callings. It is that there are two different levels upon which they live. If all these wonderful things presented in Ephesians, these mighty, weighty things are elements of the true testimony of Jesus, then they belong to a place where the earthlies are left behind. To put that in another way: you have to leave the earthlies if you are coming into the realm where those mighty forces are operating.

Would you know the exceeding greatness of His power which is to usward who believe? You cannot if you live on a Corinthian level, if you live on a natural, earthly basis, even as a Christian. Do you want to know the fullness of Christ? Do you want to become in a related way the fullness of Him that filleth all in all? You can never be that if you live spiritually at Corinth. The testimony is a mighty thing. It is a thing fraught with these massive elements and features of the risen and ascended Lord. There will be a universal expression of that fullness in the ages to come, but even now we are to partake of it. It is to be known and set forth now in a spiritual way in the life of the Church, but the Church has to come out on to the ground which is presented in this letter to the Ephesians. I am not saying that the church at Ephesus was on this level. It

may or it may not have been. But it seems perfectly clear that the Ephesian saints were in a position to have such a revelation given to them, and the Corinthians were not. The Corinthians were not ready for it. But if Paul's visit to Ephesus and the results are indicative of anything, they do speak of thoroughness there. They brought their books of magic and made a great fire of them, and their price was considerable. They sacrificed everything to the fire because they had found a new mystery, a heavenly force which was more than the force of the magicians, the occultists, the spiritists, something far above all that. They had discovered Christ, and at great cost they let all else go, and that prepared the way for a wonderful revelation to them. Paul was able to say to those Ephesian elders: "I shrank not from declaring unto you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). You can never declare the whole counsel of God to any company of people unless they are ready for it. He had a clear way at Ephesus, and on their part it represented a spiritual position of abandonment of earthly connections, relationships, interests, and religious systems.

We focus our attention for a few minutes upon some of the more specific reasons and causes. These have been included in our general survey, but we now mention them particularly.

THE COMPARISON OF THE CORINTHIAN AND EPHESIAN ASSEMBLIES

1. The Place of Man

Look at these two, and focus your attention upon one word, or one title, one designation namely, that of 'man'. What was the place of man in these two different assemblies? In Corinth man, as such, had a very large place. The Apostle says: "I could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, as unto babes in Christ... for whereas there is among you jealousy and strife, are ye not carnal, and walk after the manner of men? For when one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not men?" (1 Corinthians 3:1, 3-4). Is it not man, as such, that is very much in view? Man was coming into view to the obscuring of Christ. All the way through that letter natural elements in man are being dealt with. Whatever it is, at whatever point you touch this terrible trouble that engaged the Apostle, you are touching some expression of man in himself, some dispute, for example, though over what we do not exactly know. But two believers, members of the same assembly, have perhaps been in some business transaction, and there has been something not straight, something upon which they have come to a serious difference, and one says: 'All right, I will take it to court, and will fight you there!' It is man doing things as man does them. All the time it is a case of man occupying a strong place of possessiveness and forcefulness.

Turn to the letter to the Ephesians, and see where man comes in there. You cannot find him; but we find "one new man", that new man which we are exhorted to put on (Ephesians 4:24). The old man has given place to the new man. It is not the individual standing for himself that we see now but rather the individual rightly functioning in the corporate new man. It is no longer a case of so many separated individuals all thinking of their own interests, but all that individualism is lost in the one collectivity and relativity of the new man. You can almost see them growing up into Him - "Till we all attain unto the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a full grown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

That word "man" is a key to the situation in both letters. How? If he is allowed to come in, there will be a state such as you have at Corinth. If he goes out, the prospects are of an Ephesian position. That is the work of the Cross. You are not surprised, then, that in the Ephesian letter fairly early you come upon the words: "... quickened us together with Christ... and raised us up in him, and made us to sit with him in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus..." All that quickening and raising presupposes a death, and that is the death of

the old man, the man by nature.

2. The Place of the World

The word 'world' occurs a number of times in the letter to the Corinthians - "the wisdom of this world", "the princes of this world". Read down those first two chapters, and see what a large place the world takes. The world and its wisdom, the world with its spirit, the world with its way, had a large place amongst the Corinthian believers. If you follow through the letter you cannot get away from it. It is the way of the world, the way the world does things, or conditions ruling in the world - the spirit of the world - that is continually before us. The world has a large place in their reasoning. They are even handling heavenly and Divine things with worldly wisdom.

Turn to the letter to the Ephesians and see where the world is. It is left behind and believers are seen spiritually as out of the world, though not literally so. They were here on the earth as much as ever Corinthians were, and were in the world as a sphere. They were here, and yet not here. Recall those strange and seemingly contradictory phrases in John 17: "... the men whom thou gavest me out of the world..."; "They are not of the world." "I pray not that thou shouldst take them from the world..." We know what is meant in a spiritual sense and there is no contradiction; in it and out of it at the same time. In Ephesians 5 and 6 those things which belong to ordered life here are mentioned. There are families; husbands and wives, parents and children; masters and servants. You say: 'Merely earthly!' No! They are the relationships proper to life here, and yet in them is the possibility of a heavenly life. All are lifted on to a heavenly level where spiritual interests govern those relationships with a view to heavenly purposes and not just earthly interests. The world, in the sense in which it is found in 1 Corinthians, is not found in Ephesians.

That explains the testimony and shows what is necessary for this impact upon spiritual forces. That can never be unless we come to the same position, with the world left behind in this sense. "Our wrestling is not against flesh and blood" - that is the world's way of doing things - "but against the principalities, against the powers..." It is a case of getting behind flesh and blood, and what a much more effective wrestling that is! What mighty issues there are in the spiritual realm! How things count when we know the secret of functioning there in the power of the risen Lord! But that requires that we shall know here, in mind and in spirit, absolute separation from this world.

3. The Difference in the Order at Corinth and Ephesus

At Corinth two things, or two sides of the one thing are presented. In what the Apostle has to say you have a heavenly order brought before you. He is indicating what that heavenly order is in the Church and is seeking to recover it, or to establish it. But over against, at least the intimation, of heavenly order - for the Apostle does not develop it in fullness - there is a terrible disorder in the assembly. Read through the letter again, and see how everything is out of order. Their procedure, their government, their relationships, are all in disorder. In dealing with the causes the Apostle has raised questions and issues which have become the battleground of the Church ever since: relationships and orders, positions and administrations in the Church. All this was out of order at Corinth.

We are not going to deal with the specific points. It would take too long, and might not be altogether profitable. At any rate, it might swing us away from our specific intention at this time. Sufficient to say that the question at Corinth is largely a question of order or disorder. We must recognize that. There is nothing arbitrary about the Apostle in that letter. A false explanation and interpretation has been put upon a great

deal that Paul said in that letter - as, for instance, upon his reference to the place of the sisters in the assembly. The interpretation or construction placed upon his words has been that Paul was a woman-hater, and that he was caught up in the Rabbinical idea of women, which held they were subject and had to be kept in a place of subjection, and therefore that what he wrote in that letter was out from that mentality, that conception. Nothing is further from the truth. Nothing is a greater libel against the Apostle. The Apostle was not dealing for one moment with the question of status, of honour; he was dealing purely with a matter of order. He will not rule sisters right out of the assembly in the matter of functioning, but he will show that their functioning is relative, and that it is both right and profitable when in its place. It is a matter of order. Let that be established, and be quite clear. We fasten upon this one point to indicate what we mean.

Turn to the letter to the Ephesians, and you can discover nothing about disorder in the assembly. Chapter 4 presents the Body and its relationships established; or that part of the letter brings it mainly into view. It is a beautiful heavenly order. There is no reference to an upsetting of that order; it is simply presented as though it obtained there. There is no quarrel over it, no fighting for it; it is a statement of a heavenly order. You are in a different atmosphere altogether. The point is that the Church's testimony to the risen Lord in the power of His risen life is bound up with order in the House of God. If the Divine order is upset, the testimony is weakened, and is nullified in that measure. There is a tremendous amount bound up with order. Let no one think that the appeal for order is simply with a view to having a domination, a control, a power over others, a desire to subject people. The word 'subjection' has become anathema to a good many because they have missed its significance. It is the value of Divine order, heavenly order, expressed amongst the Lord's people that is in point; for this is so vital a factor in the meeting of the enemy. A Corinthian disorder cannot destroy the power of the principle, and world rulers cannot stand before spiritual forces when a Divine order is established and adhered to and sacredly guarded. Then there is a wonderfully clear way for the Lord to come through and meet the enemies of the Church. Very often a church is divided and broken, and crying out for victory, for deliverance, for power, for effectiveness; and if the Lord could only be heard speaking He would be heard to say: 'Set your house in order! That is the way to power. Put things right in your midst, and your prayers will be answered. You are crying to Me to give you something which you call power, effectiveness. The way to it is through the clearing up of the disorders that are among you.'

So the expression of His life demands a heavenly realm; separation from the world by the death of the old man in his natural strength and life, the constituting of things according to the heavenly pattern. This is all practical. There are no flights of thought to carry you away into ecstasies, but there is a coming down on to the practical basis of everyday things. I am persuaded that nothing touches the heart of the whole issue more than this. I am certain that the Church's defeat, and weakness, and failure in testimony today, in the first place, is because it has become such an earthly thing; because of the worldly elements that have gained entrance; because man, as man, has such a large place in it; because the heavenly order does not obtain, but a man-made order in what is called the Church. These things are as closely related to the effectiveness of testimony as anything can be.

Do you know heavenly union with the Lord? Have you from your heart abandoned this world? Have you accepted the meaning of His Cross for the putting aside of all that belongs to man as such? Are you quite sure that you are fitting in your place in the House of God, and that you are not out of your place? So far as your devotion to the Lord is concerned, are you really bent upon being in your place, and remaining in your place, and functioning there for the Lord? Are you a party to something which is not an expression of

the heavenly pattern? Are you an officer of an official connection, supporting and upholding an order which is not the Lord's order? Well, you will be beaten in the general defeat of such a thing. It is bound to be defeat, so far as the main testimony is concerned. These are practical, direct questions. The Lord give grace, and understanding, and response to what this means. I have no doubt that as you go on from now the meaning of all this will come to you in a growing way. You may not grasp it all now, but it is something laid in store. Remember, it does matter tremendously whether you are in a Corinthian condition or an Ephesian, and these are the features and the differences.

The Lord make us, if we may say it in a spiritual sense, good Ephesians!

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