

The Cross and the Church (Continued)

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Church's expression in the universe is a correspondence to Christ, particularly in terms of life, light, and love, which are the driving forces of its spiritual growth and reproduction.

Scripture: Matthew 21:19, John 3:16, John 5:20, John 9:25, John 12:24, John 14:31, 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, Ephesians 3:10, Ephesians 4:16, Ephesians 5:25

Topics: "Life in Christ", "The Nature of the Church"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the Church as the cosmic expression of Christ, highlighting its spiritual nature and accountability to God. He discusses the essential elements of life, light, and love as manifestations of Christ within the Church, asserting that true expression comes from the resurrection life of Christ. The Church's role is not merely doctrinal but to embody the life of Christ, which is inherently reproductive and transformative. Sparks stresses that love, rooted in the understanding of the Cross, is fundamental to the Church's growth and unity, and that spiritual knowledge is a byproduct of love. Ultimately, the Church's testimony must reflect the life, light, and love of Christ to the world.

Transcript

In our consideration of the Church we have on several occasions used the word "expression," thus noting the difference between the heavenly conception and nature, and the practical application. This latter is of very great importance, and it is here that we find all the reactions of God against declension and failure down the ages. The WHOLE Church on earth may not come to a true and full expression of God's thought as to its nature - it never has since the very first days - but God has never accommodated Himself to this failure and given some intimation that He will be satisfied with whatever He can get. He holds to His full mind, retains the full revelation of it in the New Testament, seeks to have as many in the good of it as will pay the price, and determines SPIRITUAL measure accordingly, while blessing all that He can that contributes to it.

We are therefore bound to say something regarding the expression of the Church in this universe; for we must remember that the Church is more than earthly, it is cosmic. Its accountability extends even now "unto the principalities and powers in the heavenlies" (Eph. 3:10). If, as we have said, the Church is Christ in corporate expression we shall best apprehend this practical aspect of its calling by considering its correspondence to Christ.

Christ Spiritually Expressed

When we turn to see how Christ was here spiritually, we find that it was mainly in terms of three great forces and impacts - Life, Light, Love. Just to say this is, for the average reader of the New Testament, to bring up no small material which bears it out.

"In Him Was Life"

Life is the supreme issue of the Bible, and therefore of creation. The Bible opens with the Tree of Life and it closes with the same. Everything between, as covering the whole history of creation, is focused upon this issue. It is one long continuous conflict concerned with this one question. If the Old Testament is, as Christ said it was, a testifying to Him in all its parts, the issue is found in Christ RISEN, triumphant over death. The Church's preaching in the Book of the "Acts" is little more than a proclamation of the resurrection of the Christ. Thus Christ is the comprehensive and all inclusive embodiment of death's destruction and life victorious. The Church as His Body takes up this testimony, not firstly doctrinally or verbally, but actually and factually. It is intended to be the carry-on of Christ in this respect. Not to historic events nor to New Testament teaching does she first bear her witness, but she is to BE the very embodiment of Christ in terms of life.

There are three ways in which life is manifested.

(1) Life Is Generic

The Divine principle of the creation is biological. Life is the key to everything. When God put life into things He not only set a course in motion which would work itself out apart from outside stimulants and direction, but He introduced the potentialities of perfect development according to the particular kingdom to which the organism belonged - human, animal, vegetable, etc. Life produced after its own kind, but life PRODUCED. The battle for life and of life started when sin entered; but whatever the changes, life still forces on and keeps the creation going. So in the spiritual realm, life is the key to everything, and the only justification for the continuance of this creation. The Church, for which all things are summed up in Christ, takes its origin from His resurrection, and therefore the implanting of His triumphant life. 'She is His new creation,' and He is her new creation life. Her very existence rests upon His risen life. She will eventually be judged by Him Who stands before her and says, "I am... the Living One; and I became dead, and behold, I am alive for evermore." Not sound doctrine alone; not much activity; not a high standard of moral integrity; but life, death-conquering, hell-vanquishing life, will be the test.

(2) Life Is Energetic

The driving force of the Church is the power of life. In Ezekiel's vision of the Cherubim and the wheels, a symbol of Christ and the Church, the driving force was the Spirit of life. It is a picture of energy. Going, going, ever going, ceasing not, and straight forward. It is the Living Ones (not "beasts" or "creatures") in corporate expression. It is not difficult to see the correspondence between this as a symbol and the actual spiritual counterpart in the Church at the beginning. Life took charge, or the Spirit as the Spirit of life took charge, and the goings were with much energy. Testimony, evangelism, mutual concern, and many other things betokened life. It was not man-made zest, enthusiasm, emotion, drive, or momentum. It was accounted for by no external stimulant being administered. Such would need to be kept up by outside means, but this was spontaneous and transcended all obstacles.

When we read of "the power that worketh in us," or "working in us that which is well-pleasing," or "His working, which worketh in me mightily," the word in the Greek is "energy," "energizeth," "energizing." It is

the energy of Divine LIFE by the Holy Spirit, and is so frequently set over against much human frailty and infirmity, thus constituting a mighty testimony to "the power of His resurrection." There is nothing to account for the persistence and accomplishments of the Church but the supernatural energy of the Divine LIFE in her, and this is the testimony for which she exists. You have to look deeper into the Jesus of Nazareth, the Man of Galilee, for an explanation of His impact upon this world through so long a time, and you will find the secret in the LIFE which was in Him and which He imparts in new birth. In the same way the Church's secret should always be deeper than her outward form; it should be the energy of nothing less than the very LIFE of God in her.

(3) Life Is Reproductive

This is THE meaning of life. It may mean joy, energy, beauty, and activity, but its essential value and supreme function is reproductiveness. Life demands a way to reproduce after its kind, and any organism which refuses right-of-way to life by denying its facilities for transmission commits a breach of trust. Nowhere is life a possession just to be enjoyed. It is a stewardship to be sacredly fulfilled. That barren fig-tree of Matthew 21 is a parable of an unfulfilled trust; receiving without passing on. Possess life and give it a free course and reproduction is spontaneous. This is not only the statement of a fact, it is a test. The New Testament Church, or the Church in the New Testament, was a spontaneously reproductive Church, without machinery, organization, publicity, propaganda. It propagated itself purely by reason of the life in it. There are many substitutes for Divine life in organized Christianity which explain the slow and hard going, expensive output, and poor quality of results. There is no real substitute for the Church, and the Church expressing Christ as "seeing His seed" in terms of spontaneous reproduction of life. There is something irresistible about life and the most serious consequences are attached to attempts to thwart it. Christ - the Life - is JUST SIMPLY BOUND to come out with a great multitude at the end.

But this life-productiveness is by way of the Cross. The classic Scripture on this is John 12:24. The grain of wheat dies to reproduce itself. Christ Himself brought His Church into being thus. So that corporate expression of Christ is not only by HIS death, but potentially the death of all, and the truly living ones are those who have been "raised together with Him." This is the Church, and the continuation of reproduction is the continuation of the faith acceptance of death and resurrection union with Him, with all that God means by that.

"The Life Was The Light"

In the order of the new creation, that is, of what is spiritual, light follows life; life precedes light. Nicodemus was a man in the dark, groping. Christ said to him, "Except a man be born anew he cannot SEE." Light is the great seeing factor; therefore it means knowing, perceiving, being sure. Inasmuch as it comes through life it must be subjective, inward. The man born blind (John 9) who received his sight is a full scale example or type of this. The touch of Jesus communicated life, vital power. He saw. Then, over against every effort to undermine his faith, to prejudice his mind, he simply answered that he had the goods and that was what really mattered. There was no merely doctrinal argument. It was not a matter of a certain line of teaching or angle of truth. It was Christ in terms of living light. He not only had light on things, he had SIGHT. It was not information ABOUT, but it was apprehension OF!

What a challenge to the Church this is! Christ is not theories, interpretations, doctrines, speculations, information, themes, etc. Christ is the impact of light upon darkness, so that "the darkness overcometh Him not." This is exactly what a corporate expression of Christ is; is, not should be. The Church, when in

her true place and relationship to Him, is this. It can be as truly so with her as it was in His own case.

Much could be written regarding the effect of light, but here we are only stating spiritual facts, and leaving it with those concerned to do the measuring up. When the sun shines in its power it is not necessary to discuss theories about light, and if you do, it is only in the nature of explaining something which already exists. Nine-tenths of Christian teaching today has to do with what would follow, obtain, result, if certain things happened; or in explaining what would happen if certain things were observed. There is VERY little call for explaining what is happening, answering the enquiry, "What meaneth this?" with "This is that." And yet it ought to be this way. New Testament doctrine was mainly an explanation of what had happened. It is important as light upon life, but the fact of the Church's being in the place where this life is bringing forth enquiry as to her secret is really where she begins her ministry. So it was on the Day of Pentecost. See what a tantalizing enigma Christ was when here. "Whence hath this Man this wisdom?" Not of the schools, the seats of learning, nor the books, but in fellowship with the Father, under the anointing of the Spirit, He saw what the Father was doing (John 5:19). The Church should be just the same; baffling the unbelieving, defeating the curious, leaving the prejudiced with FACTS, and being light to the true seekers.

But she will have to undergo a deep crucifixion to her own wisdom as to how the work of God is done. There is no light on the death side of the Cross where man by nature is shut out from God. She will have to cry in her blindness, "Jesus, Thou Son of David, have mercy on me." This brokenness, helplessness, hopelessness, and yet faith, will betoken her death to every resource but Him Who is the life and the light of man. The Cross governs this whole matter of the Church's testimony to the light.

The Love Of Christ

It seems hardly necessary to gather up what is in the New Testament to show that, like as Christ was here as the life and light of men, so He was here as the embodiment and expression of the love of God. This is all so well known. In the same way it would be unnecessary to cite the much Scripture which shows that it is by that love that the Church proves Him to have been sent of God (John 17:21).

There are, however, some things in this connection which need fresh emphasis, if not an indicating of their implications. Seeing that we are dealing with the Church and the Cross, we can find all that is necessary in that part of the New Testament where this is brought to its fullest expression. In the Letter to the Ephesians it is most impressively made clear that even

Light Is Based Upon Love

"Ye, being rooted and grounded in love, may be strong to apprehend..." (3:17-18).

Earlier in the letter we have these words: "having the eyes of your heart enlightened..." (1:18). Then what immense things follow as to be known by the Church! We do not dwell upon them, but upon this fact, that light, knowledge, is the fruit which springs from rooting in love. It would seem that God only gives - but gives abundantly - spiritual knowledge to those whose main characteristic is love. Love for Him, yes! but love for His own and for all men.

"I love the Father" (John 14:31). "The Father loveth the Son and sheweth Him all things..." (John 5:20). So Christ attributed His own knowing all things from the Father to mutual love between them. But Christ was the personal embodiment and manifestation of God's love for the elect and for the world (John 3:16; 17:23). (See also Eph. 5:25) John is known as the Apostle of love. What a wealth of spiritual light has

come to us through him! Paul was behind no one in this matter of Divine love and has given us the classic of all time as to it (1 Cor. 13). What fullness and depths of revelation the Church owes to him!

A scientist may describe a tear in terms of water, salt, and mucus, but the mother or lover UNDERSTANDS it in terms of its real meaning. A head knowledge is no knowledge at all in spiritual values. Only the knowledge which comes through the heart - travail, suffering, longing, heart-break over souls, toward the Lord - is vital knowledge. How much of the wealth of knowledge possessed by John, Paul, and others came out of their heart travail for the Church? Take that out, and there is not much left.

Love Buildeth Up

"...The increase of the body unto the building up of itself in love" (Ephesians 4:16).

You might not have thought of that when considering the material for building the Church. Truth, yes! Teaching, yes! Knowledge, yes! But the Holy Spirit singles out LOVE for the main emphasis. Ephesus evidently stood for something in the matter of spiritual values. The fact that the Holy Spirit was so unrestrained in giving such light, light exceeding anything else in the whole Bible, is a fairly good proof of capacity. How well we know that when we minister in the Spirit we have liberty or restraint governed by the spiritual capacity of our hearers. We would often go further, but we just cannot. It comes back at us. At other times or places we can go all the way. Paul was just caught away with superlatives which piled themselves one upon another when he wrote that letter. The longest sentence without a full period in the Bible is found there. He could not stop for the rules and regulations of punctuation. Surely the explanation of this release of the Lord is found in His address to Ephesus in the Revelation (2:4) "Thou didst leave thy first love." "Thy first love." There must have been something very precious to the Lord at the beginnings of the church in Ephesus. It is like the cry and sob of a broken-hearted lover, whose love moves into jealousy and heat against the detractor and the unfaithfulness. He sees the triumph of the "god of this world" in blinding the mind, and is angry with Ephesus for complicity with him. Well, much, very much, can be added on this matter, but enough! Remember that the way in which the Church will be built inwardly and outwardly will not be alone by meetings, conferences, addresses, teaching, nor by campaigns, but by the bathing of all in love, and sometimes just pure love without lectures.

But - and is it necessary to say it? - this love is the fruit of a deeply crucified life. It is only in a true and adequate apprehension and appreciation of the Cross that the heart is enlarged to ALL men. 'Love to the loveless.' It is only as the Cross has struck deeply at the roots of pride, personal interest, ambition, reputation, selfishness, and concern for something less than the whole purpose of God, that God will really build His Church. The Church is the Lamb's WIFE. It is a LOVE matter! These two are one. She takes her very object in life from Him. She leaves all personal and former interests and relationships, and they two become one flesh.

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