

# The Essential Service of the Church

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The essential service of the church is to minister the fulness of Christ within its own compass and beyond its own compass, now and in the ages to come.*

**Scripture:** Ephesians 4:7

**Topics:** "The Church's Mission", "Individual Responsibility in Ministry"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the essential service of the church as the body of Christ, which is called to fulfill God's divine purpose of filling all things with His presence. He illustrates this through the story of Esther, highlighting that the church is not merely for its own benefit but is a ministering instrument for the good of others. The sermon stresses that every individual in the church has a responsibility to contribute to the body, using the gifts given by Christ to build up the church and reach the fullness of Christ. Sparks warns against a self-centered approach and encourages believers to actively engage in their calling as ministers of Christ. Ultimately, the church's mission is to be a channel of God's grace and life to the world.

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## Transcript

Reading: Ephesians 4:7-13.

Now we come to the essential service of the church in relation to the divine end "That he (Christ) might fill all things".

We saw that that is the divine purpose, fixed in eternity, unalterable and undefeatable. We saw that, alongside of that, the church, which is the body of Christ, is said to be "the fulness of him that filleth all in all" (Ephesians 1:23). Then we went on to see the method of that fulfilment, as made so clear in this letter in which the apostle begins to sum up all that he has said, and head it up to this sublime issue of the marriage relationship between Christ and the church. We saw, illustrating from the Book of Esther, what that marriage relationship means: divine election, divine redemption, divine enrichment and adornment, divine covenant. All that was illustrated in the case of Esther, and there we stopped.

We stopped short of the next thing -- essential service. It is perfectly evident in that book of divine sovereignty in operation, for undoubtedly that is the meaning of the book, that Esther was not just selected, chosen, called to the king, to the palace, released from the embargo of her exile and captivity, redeemed, and then adorned with everything that was essential to make her suitable for the presence of the king and enriched with his riches for the sake of Esther herself. It was not just that she might be able to

sport herself in her new position and privileges, and strut in and out of the palace and show off all that she had become and with what she had been endowed. The real meaning of that book, as the sequel shows, is that that divine sovereignty was in operation in all those ways in the behalf of a people who had got to be delivered, a people who had got to come into all the good of that sovereignty of the throne.

The people were under threat. They came under an edict from a very evil source -- we may say from very hell itself, as represented by that Agagite. You have only to mention that name, Agag, with any knowledge of the Old Testament, and you will remember the attitude of Samuel toward Agag. He hewed him in pieces! It is something very evil against the throne, a hand against the throne and against the people of God. And here, in this Book of Esther, this evil thing has come up from the pit, with its design to destroy the people of God and the testimony of life which is within them as a vessel. And Mordecai used the so-familiar phrase about Esther: "Who knoweth whether thou art not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?" Esther 4:14. It was the essential service of Esther, and when you come to the letter of the Ephesians, as we have seen, all these features of Esther, in spiritual expression, are in it. When you come here you arrive at this: that it is not just for the church's own sake, good, benefit, glory and pleasure. This elect vessel, instrument, is what it is as elect and foreordained in a much vaster context than itself, just as the city at the end of the Bible stands in the midst of the nations to mediate life to the nations through its tree of life and river of life. It is only another figure or symbol of a great divine truth. Right at the heart of things is this elect body, elected, foreordained, to minister the fulness of Christ within its own compass and beyond its own compass, now and in the ages to come.

That is the essential service of the church. Now, with that service in view, the apostle is led to bring us to this matter of the church's ministry as the way to the end of His filling all things by means of it: the church as a ministering instrument or vessel.

That is what is here. It is the ministry of Christ and of His fulness through the church, through us, if we are truly in and of that body. It is our vocation. I do want to emphasise this. I want you to be quite sure that you get hold of this. All that is said here about other people functioning is only within the compass of this -- that this is essentially a ministering church, or it has missed the way. And that is a tragic missing of the way!

Israel was called in the Old Testament the wife of the Lord, the bride of the Lord. "I was a husband unto them, saith the Lord" (Jeremiah 31:32). Israel was called to be the ministering channel and instrument of the Lord to all the nations, and because Israel did not fulfil that high purpose and vocation but built walls around itself and shut itself in and became an exclusive body in the nations, for two thousand years it has been out of the way. It has missed the way, it has been set aside. It is in the place of Vashti, who was supplanted by Esther.

When we speak of the church, don't let us get beyond the individual responsibility. There can be no such thing as a church without the individuals that make it up. Every individual is a part of that church, that body, and is intended to be a functioning part. That is the point. Every one of you without exception is supposed to be contributing something out of the fulness of Christ beyond yourself to others. You are in this high and holy calling, vocation, to be the channel, the vehicle, the mediator, of something of that fulness. The Lord has made His provision for others, and, having done so, of course He expects it to be so.

We have here these words: "When he ascended on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men... And he gave some apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and

teachers", and, of course, we feel their job is to bring the church to fulness. Well, it doesn't matter, that is their work, that is their job, that is their vocation, that is what they are called for, and we just sit back and listen to what they have to say, and think: "Well, that was all right, or it was not so good today... it was pretty good, or it was very good." Then we go home and that is the end of it. No, never! That is a misapprehension of what is stated here. These gifts, it is stated here, were given for the perfecting, the making complete of the saints "unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ: till we all attain unto... the fulness of Christ." These gifts are only, but essentially, to bring the church into the place where it can fulfil its ministry. Make no mistake about that! The ministry belongs to the church. The Lord has made provision for the church to be helped to fulfil its ministry by these gifts.

This is a wonderful statement (in verse 8)! As you know, it is a quotation from Psalm 68. You recall that psalm! It is the psalm of the triumphant return of the victorious monarch after his campaign in which he has overthrown his enemies, has taken great spoil and has brought back many prisoners. In his triumph and in the bounty of his gains he is now generously distributing his gifts to the people in his kingdom in order that they may come into the good of his great triumph. That is the picture in Psalm 68, and there is little doubt, I think, that that psalm has as its historic background David's conquest of Zion.

You remember the story. Zion was held by the Jebusites, and they had manned it with their weakest, their lame and their blind, because to their minds it was such an impregnable stronghold that it did not need anything more than that to defend it. David threw out his challenge concerning the taking of the stronghold, inspiring his men to that great work, and they launched their attack, scaled the height and overthrew the enemy, subduing every opposing force, and taking great spoil. David followed up and took over all these gains, and, although it does not say so, in keeping with the practice on such occasions, he distributed his gains to all the people, in order that they might know what a great leader, conqueror and king he was.

That is the picture behind Psalm 68. It is a wonderful psalm -- you can read it again.

But now, is it not remarkable and impressive that the apostle lifts up out of that mighty psalm these words and transfers the whole idea to the Lord Jesus? "When he ascended on high" -- and you have to put in there words from the letter to the Hebrews: "Ye are come unto Mount Zion" (that seat and centre of His great conquest, the place where the King dwells) "...the heavenly Jerusalem" (Hebrews 12:22) -- "he led captivity captive, and gave..." And why did He give? For what purpose? That of His fulness, the fulness of His mighty conquest, His triumphant campaign the fulness and the good of that, might become the inheritance of all His people. But that that might be so there are distributors of the good and the wealth, and those distributors are named here -- "He gave some apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers." The object we shall come to again.

There is another little illustration, not so perfect or so complete, and perhaps not in such a good setting, but quite an illustration of this same thing in the life of this same man, David. During the time when he was driven out by Saul, hunted in the wilderness and he went to the land of the Philistines, he was given for his own possession and dwelling the town of Ziklag. One day, he having gone out on one of his raids, the Amalekites raided Ziklag, burned it with fire, took all its contents, David's wives and all the people, and left nothing, going off with the lot.

When David and his men returned and found this state, they were in great distress. It says they "lifted up their voice and wept, until they had no more power to weep" (1 Samuel 30:4). "And David was greatly

distressed; for the people spake of stoning him... but David strengthened himself in the Lord his God" (1 Samuel 30:6). He then called for the priest to enquire of the Lord whether he should pursue the Amalekites. The answer was "Pursue: for thou shalt surely overtake them, and shalt without fail recover all" (1 Samuel 30:8).

So David went off with his men, pursuing far and long, in fact so far and so long after a recent campaign that a number of his men were too faint and too exhausted to go on. So David left a lot of the stuff there and said: "Well, you sit here and look after this, and we will go on with this job." Leaving them there he went on, and you will remember they found a half-dead Egyptian. Apparently he was hardly conscious and was sick, having had no food for three days and three nights.

They generously gave him food and water and he regained consciousness. He then sat up and David said to him, "Who are you?" He replied, "I am an Egyptian, the servant of an Amalekite. Three days ago we made a raid upon Ziklag, but I fell sick and my master just left me, to die, apparently." David said "Will you bring us down to the Amalekites? Do you know where they are, which way they have gone?" The Egyptian said "Swear unto me by God, that thou wilt neither kill me, nor deliver me up into the hands of my master" (1 Samuel 30:15).

David did so, and the Egyptian brought him down in the trail of the Amalekites, and he overtook them. The Lord's word was fulfilled utterly. They made their assault and all but four hundred of the Amalekites were slain outright. These four hundred escaped on camels, but it says, "David recovered all" (1 Samuel 30:18). And it seems that he recovered a great deal more than he had lost! (It is always the way with the Lord -- there is always more at the end than there was at the beginning when you are moving with the Lord.

However, that is by the way.) David seems to have recovered a great deal more than he lost, for on the return journey he came back to the men whom he had left on the way and was going to give to them of the spoil. Then certain vain fellows said "No, not at all. They did not go to the battle. Why should they share the spoil?" "Ah!" said David, "Not a bit of it." "For as his share is that goeth down to the battle, so shall his share be that tarrieth by the stuff" (1 Samuel 30:24). And David made that a covenant for ever in Israel.

Then David came back to Ziklag, and you notice what he did at once? He started distributing this spoil everywhere. He sent it to Judah and sent it in all directions. He must have had a real scoop from the Amalekites! He was giving the gifts of his mighty victory in all directions. Put it round the other way. Everywhere within the range of David's associations and fellowships they were coming into the good of his victory. He had led his captivity captive, brought it back, and was now giving gifts to men.

It is an illustration which fits right in here with Psalm 68, and with what the apostle is saying to us. The Lord Jesus has made His raid -- and what a raid! He has come out of a tremendous campaign against principalities and powers and hosts of wickedness -- the whole mighty range of evil, as we shall see. But this is the position. He has turned upon the spoiler and taken the spoil, brought it back, and now He is saying "All My people must come into the good of this. They must all of My fulness receive. They must all come into the blessing of the fulness that is vested in Me through this conquest. They must be My fulness. My fulness must be seen in all My people. And unto that, unto this end, there are various ministries which I give." He "gave gifts", and in the letter to the Ephesians it is personal gifts. In the letter to the Romans, as you know, the apostle speaks of prophecy, and so on -- the thing itself, its function. But here it is the persons in the function.

It is not for us to spend a lot of time on these various functions, because that really would take all our time. We need only remark that the apostle, or the Holy Spirit through the apostle, begins with apostles, and that is a very significant thing. When you are in this particular part of the Bible, though it is a much bigger thing than that, you start at the standpoint of the universal. You are going to work inward and finish at some centres, but the apostle is a universal function. You remember, the Lord Jesus called the twelve "apostles" and sent them out -- "Go ye into all the world, and preach" (Mark 16:15) "and teach... and act... baptize". It is a universal function -- preach, teach, act, in relation to your teaching. This is not local to begin with. It is the whole range of Christ's Kingdom. Apostleship relates to that, and my point at the moment is that God begins with the universal. Nothing other. When it comes to the local presently, that must be the embodiment of all that is universal and the expression of all that is universal. If it drops on to a lower level, if it takes a smaller compass, if it becomes something less, it has missed the divine thought, and you will find that it will lose its power, and its anointing will be limited. It becomes something in itself. It starts with the universal -- "he gave some apostles". In the other place where he refers to these gifts the apostle says "First apostles" (1 Corinthians 12:28). That is you and I, and all who are in this church must first of all be imbued and inspired with the universal vision and motive. We must be gripped by the universality of Jesus Christ in this whole world, and that must be the range of vision and purpose, nothing less than that. It is something that has got to get hold of us, to liberate us entirely from all gravitations towards something less than what Christ is. Christ is so great that He is to fill all things, to the uttermost bound, and everything within is to be filled with Him. And we must have no less a vision, a motive and inspiration than that to begin with.

"Some prophets". That would take some time to explain, because apparently in the New Testament there was still a prophetic gift, even in the matter of foretelling. But taking the prophetic gift at large, it just means this -- those who are anointed to interpret the thoughts of God to His whole church, who are to bring to His church and keep before His church all the fulness of His thoughts concerning the church in itself and its vocation. A prophet has always fulfilled that function of calling back the people if they have departed and keeping faithfully before them what God meant in calling them, what God's purpose was in choosing them, what their ministry and vocation was under the anointing Spirit. They have that interpreting of God's thought by revelation from God. It is very important. These are the people to whom the Lord has shown something of His mind, His purpose. They have come to it, not by study, not by being informed, but by the Holy Spirit. They just cannot get away from that function. When you meet them and hear them you will find that they are always on the same line. All right! So long as it is not the only line! But there it is, and the prophet is for this purpose -- to keep the thoughts of God in fulness ever fresh before the people of God.

"Some evangelists". Evangelists undoubtedly were the itinerant messengers for the evangel. They had to preach the evangel here, there and everywhere. But, again, it is a sovereign gift. That dispensation has not passed. We should not say, "Now these gifts were all right for what we call apostolic times, New Testament times, but not now." Well, if we take that position we are forfeiting something very vital. These gifts, these personal gifts, ought still to be here in the church universal. They are sovereign gifts of the risen Lord, to be recognised, to be accepted, to be accredited, to be honoured. There are some men, you know, who just cannot speak and cannot preach without going straight for the unsaved. That is their very being, their very life, and if they get on to anything else, the unction goes. The Lord is with them on that line. There is no doubt about it. They are given to the church in that capacity, and they only spoil their own ministry if they try to be something else. It is as well for us to recognise this.

And then the combined function -- "pastors and teachers". I like that combination! It is really shepherds and instructors in one. You can be a shepherd, rushing round and fussing about people all the time, trying to make them comfortable and happy and pleased with themselves, and snug, and all that sort of thing. That is a shepherd, yes -- but... shepherd and instructor, pastor and teacher, in one. These whom you are cherishing -- which is right -- caring for, looking after, trying to help, are not just to be left there in their own smugness, pleased with themselves and very happy that you often go to see them and say some very nice and helpful things to them. They have got to come to understanding through the pastor and teacher. Thank God for all pastors and teachers combined! I think we in fairness ought to put it round the other way: that it can make people top-heavy if it is all teaching without cherishing. The two things must work both ways.

But when we have said all this, what is the grand object, and what is the test of ministry, test of anointing, test of function? It is found in this: "Till we all attain unto... the fulness of Christ".

Every divinely-given ministry is only for the purpose of bringing us to completeness, and ultimately to the fulness of Christ. Is it doing that? The point at which we arrive is a very practical point for us all. It is not just to hear, to listen to what is said to us, what is brought to us, by these various means. It is not just to receive all that they have got to give, stores and stores of it. The test of those of us to whom ministry has come by various instruments is: "Are we quite sure that this is resulting in some increase of Christ in us?" That will necessitate an attitude and an action. "The Lord has spoken today. The Lord has said something today. I am listening intently to this brother, this servant of the Lord, to see what it is the Lord has to say, because I am being involved in a great responsibility by having ears at all. Now, if I can in the Spirit discern anything that the Lord has said to me, I have to go straight away to turn that into life, into character, into substance, into history."

I wonder how many of us do go after a message and get before the Lord and say: "Now, Lord, it is not good enough for me just to have heard that. That may work only to my condemnation. As you said: 'The word that I spake, the same shall judge him in the last day' (John 12:48); that may only be to my condemnation. There is no guarantee that my hearing a lot of divine truth is going to result in my spiritual measure being increased willy-nilly. I have got to do something about it. I have got to take this to the Lord and do something about it."

You know how possible it is for volumes and volumes to be given over the years, and the resulting spiritual measure to be very small! One says that reluctantly, but it is possible. The point is that all these gifts are given for the perfecting of the saints "unto the work of ministering, unto the building up of the body of Christ: till we all attain unto... the fulness of Christ".

This is the essential service. You are not called to office; you are called to function. A lot of people are quite ready to begin to do something if you will only put them into a uniform, or put a badge on them, or call them by some title -- "missionary" or "reverend", or something like that. They will get busy about it then. But... oh, no! That is not what is here. The Holy Spirit through this apostle is speaking to the church -- "till we all". And he is saying that every one of the all has to increase in the measure of Christ through ministries given, and have, through that increase, something to give themselves, so that it is possible for people who are in need of light and life and help to say: "So-and-so has got something -- he has got something -- she has got something -- those people have really got something -- and it is something vital. It is not just light as such, but something vital. They count for something by what they have."

It must be like that. This is the essential service.

Now just to refer to Esther again. We mentioned how it worked out in the end because she came, through grace, marvellous grace, abounding grace, unto the riches, the wealth and the glory of her marriage relationship with the king. The whole nation derived the benefit and was saved from death unto life. It is put in a rather quaint way at the end: "The Jews had... a good day" (Esther 8:17). They kept the feast and they had "a good day"! Oh, don't the Lord's people need "a good day"! I trust we are having "a good day" today, but surely we covet for all the Lord's people a good day in this sense of release, deliverance, escape from the devices of the enemy, the counsels of hell, the verdicts of death, and a coming into all the good that Esther came into.

That is the need, the really crying need. Perhaps we are here today with some sense not only of that need but that this is really what the Lord wants. I hope with all my heart that, as we are here today and are speaking to one another, your hearts are saying: "Now this is what the church needs. It is what I need. This is it." I wish it were like that! I hope it is in some measure.

If you have that desire and wish in your heart strongly enough -- whenever there is a message which comes through a messenger of the Lord, an anointed messenger of the Lord, in whatever capacity or function he may fulfil his ministry, and you are listening and saying "What is the Lord saying today? What is it that marks this time as from the Lord?" and then "I must do something about that!" -- that kind of attitude will bring in spiritual measure, spiritual increase, spiritual wealth, and lead on to the ultimate object of it all: attaining "unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ".

The Lord burden us, if necessary, with this great sense of vocation. We are called to the throne, we are called to marriage union with the King, we are called to administer the resources of His kingdom to His people, we are called now to be ministers of Christ -- yes, ministers of Christ! And perhaps in a much more real and wonderful sense than very often is attached to that word "minister". You can have the name, you can have the word, and it can be used of people, but the Lord only knows what it means. We are called to be a ministering church in every part.

Now, go and get to it -- get to the Lord about it! Say, "I know I am nothing very much. I have not got very much life. I don't know very much. I am not very much good. But the Lord has said this and I have got to do something about it, small as I am, mean as I am, contemptible as I am, worthless as I am -- the Lord has said this to me, and I am a part of His body, and His body is called upon to be a ministering body in every part. I am in the body and 'that which every joint supplieth'. I have got to be in this supply to other parts of the body."

The Lord help you really to take that attitude and you will find in that way your deliverance from so much. A lot of our trouble, paralysis, confusion and whatnot is due to our being turned in in a corporate introspection, occupied with ourselves corporately, and with our problems. Oh, it is a trick of the devil! We will say more about it presently, but the Lord give us the great vision of Himself and our calling and -- blessed be God -- of His distribution!

If I were to add a word, I would put it in this way. You do know that in the New Testament times, in the beginning, when people really came to the Lord and were saved and baptized, the apostles did lay their hands upon them and pray for them, and if you look into the matter you will find that it was for this -- that by the Holy Spirit they should become functioning members of the body of Christ. The Holy Spirit distributed gifts for functioning, qualifying them to be functioning members. The Holy Spirit does not

recognise or accept any passengers in the church of God. Is not every one, every single one, to be a functioning member by the Holy Spirit, Who has been given to us? And while that is a challenging statement which may worry us a bit, remember, it is meant to show us this: that the Lord has made provision for what He requires. He really has, and we do know that the Holy Spirit does help us in certain ways. We say, "This is the way in which the Lord is with me. This is the way in which the Spirit helps me. This is where I find the Lord helping me." Yes, He has distributed according to His will, and it is for every one of us, by real exercise, to find out what it is that we have to do and contribute in the body of Christ. Don't try to do what someone else is doing, but get it from the Lord and it will be right.

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