

The Ministry of the Church - Part 4

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of being a living epistle of Christ, relying on the Holy Spirit for sufficiency, and manifesting Christ in our lives to spread the gospel.

Duration: 30:39

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 2:17, 2 Corinthians 3:2-3, 2 Corinthians 3:6, 2 Corinthians 3:18 - 4:1, 2 Corinthians 4:3-5

Topics: "Church"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the importance of being living epistles of Christ. He explains that the gospel spreads not only through preaching, but also through the way believers live their lives as testimonies of Christ. The speaker challenges the idea of needing letters of commendation or certificates of apostleship, stating that believers themselves are the evidence of their faith. He uses the example of the Apostle Paul, who was discredited and without credentials, yet his ministry was powerful because he was an epistle of Christ.

Transcript

In the second letter to the Corinthians, we read a few verses from the seventeenth verse of the second chapter. Second chapter, at verse seventeen, For we are not as many making merchandise of the word of God, but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God, speak we in Christ. Are we beginning again to commend ourselves, or need we, as do some, letters of commendation to you, or from you? Ye are our epistle, written in our hearts, known and read of all men, being made manifest, that ye are an epistle of Christ, ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the spirit of the living God, not in tables of stone, but in tables that are hearts of flesh.

And such confidence have we through Christ to God want, not that we are sufficient of ourselves to account anything as from ourselves, but our sufficiency is from God, who also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the spirit. For the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life. If the ministration of death, written and engraved on stones, came with glory, so that the children of Israel could not look steadfastly upon the face of Moses for the glory of his face, which glory was passing away, how shall not rather the ministration of the spirit be with glory? This is another phase in this whole letter and document relating to the ministry of the church, and we are going to dwell this evening upon this further phase concerning these living epistles and letters of commendation, in which we shall, if we do not immediately see, something of the nature of the ministry of the Lord's people.

Not the ministry to the Lord's people, at the moment, but the ministry of the Lord's people. When we commenced this consideration, we pointed out that right through the letter there are many indications of the sufferings and adversities which had come upon the Apostle Paul from this church in Corinth, at least from a section of it. It is very difficult to believe that the whole church was like this, but a section is referred to, we don't know how large it was, but it was large and serious enough for him to take so much account of it as to write at least these two considerable letters, for they both have to do with that attitude which had arisen against himself.

It is not at all certain that Peter ever went to Corinth, and the fact that there was a Peter section in Corinth is rather illuminating, I think it is akin to the situation. They have no knowledge whatever of Peter having ever been to Corinth, and yet there was that group there in the church which said, we are of Peter. I think it indicates the work of the Judaizers who followed Paul wherever he went to aid every church, every assembly of believers which had come into being through his ministry, following him to discredit him in the church, wretched business, miserable, contemptible life work.

But there it was, and we know it was a fact in other churches like Galatia, elsewhere, definitely referred to. And the fact of this Peter element seems to point to the work of the Judaizers, because Peter was the apostle to the circumcision, that is, to the Jews, and while Peter would not have agreed with them, this group, this Peter group at all, there it was. They were there, and they had influence, this Judaizing faction had influence, these people saying, now you see, Peter, Peter was the first and great apostle, he was the great spokesman on the day of Pentecost, Peter is the big man, and the man at the beginning, and Peter, he is the apostle to the Jews, and here this man Paul has repudiated that realm, the Jews, and gone to the Gentiles, which come here, the Gentiles, you see the work, because it happened.

And this leaven, this evil leaven had leavened the church at Corinth, and therefore there was amongst these believers this wretched, this miserable, contemptible activity of discrediting the apostle Paul and his ministry, and one of the lines, quite evidently, that they took and adopted was this, did Paul ever bring you letters of commendation from the church at Jerusalem? Have you ever seen his certificate of ministry, which was given him by Jerusalem, Jerusalem, not Antioch, they couldn't have said it without Antioch, but Jerusalem is the place for the Jewish element, you see. Have you ever seen his certificate, have you ever seen his letter of commendation? Did he ever come having in his hand something from Jerusalem to establish his bona fides as an apostle? Of course not, you've never seen such a thing, because he hasn't got one. Jerusalem hasn't given him authority, Jerusalem hasn't accredited his apostleship, Jerusalem has not ordained him to the ministry, he has no letters of commendation.

He has no certificate of his authority. Well, the apostle had met that, it had cut him like the many other things which we've not mentioned, but which are indicated in this letter, it cut him very deeply, suffered very acutely, because, you see, after all, this church, they all owed everything of Christ to him, he who had suffered for them, he who had day and night ministered amongst them for two years, he was given his life for them, and he naturally, because he was human, and because of his devotion, spiritual devotion, he naturally felt this kind of thing very acutely. So, he answers it, need we, as some do, as some do, letters of commendation? I know there was a bit of sarcasm in what there was in that, as some do, well I'll leave that with you, to work out, as some do, need we, need we, letters of commendation? Do we really, to you, need a certificate of our apostleship? Is that the ground of our credit, piece of paper, is that our credit? Ye, ye are our letters of commendation.

Look at yourself, who was it that led you to Christ? How did you come to know the Lord Jesus? Who was his instrument bringing you into salvation? It was not Peter, it was not Apollos, he didn't answer it, he only asked the question, left them to answer it. Look at yourselves, and look at your beginning, look at what you have of Christ, know of Christ, and what Christ means to you, and then answer the question in your own heart, how did it come to you, need we, documentary evidence?

You are the documentary evidence, you are an epistle, and not an epistle of us, no, careful, not of ourselves, we're not sufficient of ourselves, no, he's discounting himself although an instrument, a vessel, a means used, he discounts himself and says, an epistle of Christ. You are not just representatives of Paul and his teaching, propagandists of the truth that he propagates, you are not just members of a clique and a group, Pauline, you are epistles of Christ, epistles of Christ, that's the only credential, that is the true certificate, men make a great deal of these other things, you know, the official support of Jerusalem, wherever that may be, the ordination by men, the certificate of ordination, men make a lot of these things, but there's something without which all these things go for nothing, mean nothing, give us no credit, no standing, no right, no authority, the only true certificate is that people look at us and read Christ, epistles of Christ, read Christ, don't read somebody's teaching, don't read some man's name, we may have a vast amount of teaching, we may have it all, through all the years and all the conferences, but if, in looking at us, people do not read Christ, it goes for nothing, remember that, people we live with, do they read Christ, are they able to discern Christ, decipher Christ, in our lives, people we work with, this is our ministry, you see, ministry is not in the hall and gathering on the Lord's day or at special times, the ministry is in our home, that's where we can be read, most clearly, be read, it is in our business place, it is wherever we are, wherever we are, that's the place of our ministry, as the church and its members, and the ministry is that we are read, and make no mistake about it, we are read, people who live with us are reading us, people with whom we work are reading us, summing us up, taking account of us, passing their mental judgments upon us, and what is it, what is it, are we difficult people to live with, to work with, awkward, cantankerous, or do they read Christ, epistles of Christ, says Paul, I think it is very probable that Paul had in his mind, not only these tables of stone, upon which the Lord wrote the law and gave to Moses, but there was something with which Paul was quite familiar, which has only come to light in recent years, I remember, I suppose, from forty years ago, perhaps more, I came into possession of a book by Dr.

Deichmann, a great German scholar, and it was called From Egyptian Rubbish Heaps, it was a discovery that excavations had made, and it became the basis of a great deal of new information as to life and its ways in the ancient world.

From Egyptian rubbish heaps there had been some excavating, and as they threw up here from beneath, they threw up a great amount of broken earthenware, pieces of earthenware, and they saw that there was writing on the earthenware, on these pieces of earthenware, writing, and when they came to decipher the writing, they found that they were parts of letters, and when they put these pieces together, they were whole letters, and they were letters of the Greek world, the Roman world, and they began, unto the most excellent so-and-so, and then some kind of nice word, not in New Testament language, but something like this, Blessings be upon you from, well, one of the gods. Unto the most excellent, the blessing of the gods be upon you, may you be found in happiness and in peace. Well, we can, we are with Paul Antony at once in the opening of his letters.

It was actually like that, it was a formula of correspondence in those times, and these bits of broken earthenware, crockery, were called in their language the ostraca, ostraca, and our English word ostracism comes from that Greek word ostraca, thrown out, discarded bits of earthenware. I think Paul had this in

mind when he was writing here. Yes, discarded, thrown out, there's another word, pitched out, bits of mere earthenware, not dead China, earthenware, crockery, living epistles, thrown out, discredited, put on the rubbish heap, by you, but.

Epistles of Christ, very often those two things go together. On the part of the world and perhaps many Christians like Corinthians, discredited, dishonoured, thrust aside, put on the rubbish heap, refuse, but. Epistles of Christ, such a thing can happen, you see, two epistles of Christ, that happened, actually happened with the discredited, false apostles, without credentials, dishonoured there.

He can write bold letters, his letters are bold, but his personal presence is mean and despicable. His preaching, or compare his preaching with some of our Greek orators, we can't stand up to them. He acknowledged it, my speech, my preaching is not the enticing words of man's wisdom.

All right, you say what you like about my preaching, discredited. My person, I know all about my physical infirmities and I know my physical presence doesn't impress you very much and you can say what you like about that, which is going to be quite true, and all the other things that they said, and there are many of them recorded. But dear friends, today, today, what about this ostracher, ostracised man, what about it? Is he an epistle of Christ? Is he a living epistle? You notice that this is set in the context of the veil which Moses put over his face, and the two things said in connection with that veil are these, the glory which was passing, passing, fading, the glory which remains, abides, contrasted ministry, the transient, the passing, the abiding, the permanent.

I suggest to you that Paul belongs to the latter category, the permanent, the abiding, because a ministry of Christ. Well, this is challenging, isn't it? I don't know that it's necessary to say a lot more. This is, this finds us out.

It shows us just what the ministry of the Church is. But there's another thing here, because this is all of a piece. You go back to chapter one, chapter one, at verse twenty-one, you have this, Now, he that establisheth us with you in Christ, the word is really into Christ, establisheth us with you into Christ, and anointed us, is God, an anointed vessel.

Now, everybody here, I should think, knows the meaning of the anointing in the Bible. Kings were anointed, priests were anointed, some prophets were anointed. But the anointing, which was the symbol of the coming of the Holy Spirit upon that one, the anointing was always in relation to some ministry.

It was not just having the Holy Spirit, but it was the positive aspect of the Holy Spirit in divine expression. If it was the king, it was for kingship, for authority, for rule. If it was the priest, it was for mediation.

It was his service, his work. So with such prophets as were anointed, it was always the active side. And you notice, immediately Jesus had been anointed of the Holy Spirit, he went forth to his ministry.

First, his ministry was challenged in the wilderness by the devil. And then he returned from the wilderness in the power of the Spirit, came to Nazareth, and he was in his life ministry. The anointing was that, the practical, active aspect of the life of a man of God.

And hath anointed us, with you, joint anointing of the church. Anointed. This just means the fact that the Holy Spirit has come to us, dear friends, carries with it the fact of an activity in our lives, in ministry, in ministering Christ, in showing Christ, in expressing Christ, in making Christ known.

The Holy Spirit, if he is with us at all, is with us on that line. The enablement and the wisdom, the power, the endurance, the effectiveness, fruitfulness, all by the Spirit. Notice the apostle speaks much about the Spirit here at the beginning of the letter.

Where the Spirit is Lord, or where the Spirit of the Lord is, liberty and so on, and hath anointed us. It all goes into this great matter of our ministry. We are not sufficient of ourselves, not sufficient of ourselves.

We have no sufficiencies, but he hath anointed us. And that's the sufficiency. Wonderful thing, wonderful thing.

Takes me right back to the beginning of my ministry, where I first had a responsibility for a company of the Lord's people, a company of people. I had become, as the language is, their pastor. But you know, it was present with me so much there, I haven't got the ability.

I am not fit, fitted in any way for this work, but there's the Holy Spirit equal to it all. I can count on the Holy Spirit. And from that first until this day, I believe that it's just been that.

The one side of deep consciousness that we are not sufficient of ourselves. On the other, there's the anointing. There's the anointing.

We can always fall back upon the Holy Spirit. I wouldn't be speaking to you so strongly about our ministry if I couldn't say this to you, that the weakest, poorest, the most inefficient, naturally can count upon the Holy Spirit. And to keep to our point, the Holy Spirit's object is to manifest Christ.

To make the impression of Christ by our being Christ. Then I'm going to stop for the present. That is another aspect of our ministry.

Living Epistles. How is the gospel to spread? How is the world to know? Well, the apostle doesn't say here anything about, or very much about, our going out here and there and everywhere, talking, preaching. May come into it for some.

But what he does say is, read and known are all men. That's how the gospel grows. That's how the world knows.

People are able to read Christ where we are. We should go to prayer in our hearts, I'm sure, on our knees more and more, Lord, fulfill this ministry. Make me a certificate of Christ.

Make me a living letter of commendation of Christ. And Epistle, we pray.

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