

This Ministry - Part 1

by T. Austin-Sparks

The church's ministry is a ministry of God, chosen and equipped by God, to fulfill a certain nature, character, and constitution, which is to sum up all things in Christ and to manifest the fullness of Christ in and to this whole universe.

Duration: 57:42

Scripture: Romans 8:28, Ephesians 1:9, Ephesians 3:8

Topics: "Ministry"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker emphasizes the disintegration and disruption that exists in the world, including within the church. However, the purpose of God remains unchanged, and His ultimate plan is to sum up all things in Christ. The speaker highlights the counter movement of the enemy to divide and disrupt anything related to Christ, particularly in the church. The ministry of the church is seen as crucial in fulfilling God's purpose, and the speaker encourages the church to understand and embrace this ministry.

Transcript

The second letter to the Corinthians. Second letter to the Corinthians, chapter four. Therefore, seeing we have this ministry, those two words will be the key to our meditation and consideration this evening, and probably the Lord wills for several evenings to come.

This ministry, this ministry, as you know we are using these few evenings for the purpose of restating and clarifying what we believe to be the Lord's meaning and purpose in the church and in our having been by his grace and mercy brought under his hand as a people here. It is very necessary that from time to time as the years go on and the company changes that we keep very clearly before us that full purpose of God into which he has called us. While we are always seeking new light and to be open to new instruction and counsel from the Lord, we must preserve the original vision and keep in line with that which has been the object of our apprehension.

And it is the church's ministry, a ministry for which the church is chosen of God and for which he, the church, is equipped by God. It is a ministry. So far as we here are concerned, we feel that the Lord has laid it very much on us to seek to be in line with the ministry of the full counsel of God.

And as things are in these times, it is very necessary that there shall be preserved a ministry amongst the Lord's people, for the Lord's people, that they shall the better be fitted with spiritual wealth and larger

measures of Christ to strengthen all the Lord's people to the fulfillment of their holy vocation in this world. Now Paul here says, we have this ministry. I think it is quite clear from the larger context of those words, when he said we, he was including the Corinthians as well as himself and his brethren who were with him in the ministry.

Later, for instance, he will say we all with unveiled face. It is the ministry of the whole church that the apostle has in view. This ministry is what the Lord would have the whole church fulfill.

And it is of very great importance that the whole church, that includes every one of us here this evening, while it goes far beyond, it is very important that every one of us should realize that we are called of God not only unto salvation and unto ultimate glory, but particularly unto a ministry. A ministry for the Lord, from the Lord, unto the Lord. We have this ministry.

And when the apostle says this ministry, you notice that the whole context of this letter defines what he means by this ministry. It is a ministry of a certain nature, character, and constitution. So that if this is true, that the church is here, particularly and preeminently to fulfill a ministry, and we are in that, we must know what that ministry is.

And we must be in line with it. The apostle first draws attention then to what the church is in itself. The we.

And then he proceeds with the vocation of that church. The church is affected as to its character by its calling. If we were to clearly apprehend our calling, we should the more forcefully realize what we've got to be.

The impetus, the motive, the dynamic of being is found in the vocation, in the calling, in what we are here for. That is, in the divine purpose. You grasp that? Let me repeat that.

That we shall find our inspiration to be what we ought to be when we adequately apprehend what it is the Lord has called us for. That is, to do. Because we cannot do that and fulfill the vocation unless we are of a certain kind, of a certain character.

It does not just happen willy-nilly. The Lord requires a certain kind of we for this particular kind of ministry. That is, the whole force of this letter, as you know, the apostle is seeking to show what the ministry is, and by showing that, inspiring and encouraging and admonishing the church to be worthy of that ministry, to be the kind of church necessary to fulfill it.

So we begin this evening to consider the nature of this ministry. What constitutes it? There is very much to be said, and I confess to you that I am so full that I am most eager to get on. My peril will be to overrun the matter.

But we will seek to confine ourselves for this little time this evening to one aspect or phase of this ministry. It is what the apostle means when he repeatedly speaks of God's purpose. Notice that was a characteristic conception in the apostle's heart and mind.

We are very familiar, for instance, with the words of Romans 8, 28, the last clause of which is, called according to his purpose. Called according to his purpose. And again in Ephesians chapter 1 verse 9. Having made known unto us the mystery of his will according to his pleasure, good pleasure, which he purposed in him, that is, in Christ.

Verse 11. In whom also we were made a heritage, having been foreordained according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his will. It is with something that the apostle terms the purpose, the eternal purpose, in mind that the church has its existence.

When we come to look at these scriptures and break them up, analyze them, we find that this purpose has several aspects. Firstly, it is shown to be consummately and all-inclusively a gathering together of all things in Christ. That's the purpose, comprehensively.

To gather together all things in Christ. And then in the second place, the purpose is to manifest or express the fullness of Christ in and to this whole universe. That is the counsel of God's will.

And then in the third place, we find that for that, for that, God before times eternal chose or elected the church, that which is called the church, to be the vessel for this purpose. Look at that a little more closely, those three things. And it is put in several different ways, different translations, to sum up all things in Christ.

Or to gather together all things in Christ. Or again, to reunite all things in Christ. Or, once more, to gather up into one all things in Christ.

That is the preeminent explanation of the Lord Jesus. Paul was mainly interested in the eternal significance of Christ and of his vocation in the purpose of God. Therefore, there is very little indeed in Paul's writings throughout of the earthly life of the Lord Jesus.

Practically nothing from his birth onward to his cross. Paul does not give us any account of the journeys of the Lord Jesus when here on earth, of his miracles, of his discourses. He says practically nothing about that whole period.

He has anything to say about the Lord Jesus in that connection. It is almost entirely about the meaning of the incarnation. That is, his self-emptying, humbling himself and taking upon him the form of a bond slave and being found in passion as a man.

Well, that goes back to the beginning and there onward. He has practically nothing to say until he comes to the cross. He has a lot to say about that.

Paul is not concerned with the earthly or historic Christ. He is concerned with the eternal significance of his person and his work. That is very largely why he so often uses the title Christ and the Christ, which is a larger title than Jesus.

He often speaks, of course, of Jesus, but Paul's great title for him is Christ and the Christ. That relates to his anointing for his vocation to fulfill his great purpose in this universe. It is the eternal Christ that Paul is concerned with.

And it is he who in this unique, peculiar and particular way brings us to that eternal vocation. He shows us that in those eternal counsels of God, the Son was intended to be the sum of all things and all things to be the sum of him. He should fill all things and in all things have the preeminence.

In him all things should consist and everything in this universe should find its integrating center and power in Christ. That was the divine intention. Then things proceeded, as we only too well know, to the point where a mighty, determined counter to that entered into this universe.

It is something with which you and I ought to be perhaps more impressed than we are, that along every line of divine intention concerning the Lord Jesus, there is a counter movement in this universe. Did God intend and determine that in and through his Son the glory of God should be manifested in this universe? It should be glory in and by Christ Jesus? And we have a great deal of data on that matter. Very well then, says this counter movement, we will make it our business to see that everything that relates to the Lord Jesus is brought into shame and dishonor.

What a history there is! You cannot bring anything of the Lord Jesus in for glory without this counter movement to bring that under a reproach, into shame, into disrepute and to thwart and frustrate the glory. Is it the wealth, the riches of Christ and that are in Christ that are to be displayed and enjoyed? Very well, says the counter movement, everything that is related to Christ we will bring into poverty. We will counter that.

And there is a lot of history in that. The poverty, the poverty of what has the name of Christ on it in this world. Spiritual poverty.

Poorness. And so you follow it round the clock and at every point where God determines something concerning his Son, you find the counter movement. And here it focuses upon this matter of gathering together, gathering together, summing up, reuniting, gathering into one all things in Christ.

Very well, said that counter movement, we will make it our business to divide everything that has the name of Christ on it. We will not stop short at anything to counter that uniting movement in Christ. We'll break it up somehow.

And what a lot of history there is in that. If the church is brought into being for that purpose, well, the enemy hasn't spared himself to spoil that purpose in the church. We'll come to that again in a moment.

Here we find ourselves in a disintegrated and disrupted universe in every direction and in every connection. Not stopping short of what is called the church. Very carefully put it like that, what is called the church.

The purpose of God stands. And his predetermined counsel, the counsel of his will, will eventually and ultimately be fulfilled. He will sum up all things in Christ.

Now you see, God is engaged deeper than our sensing and our sight upon this matter of reintegrating in his Son. And the basic principle of this integration, this reuniting, the basic principle is Christ himself. You get hold of that, you get past a great many difficulties.

The ground of oneness is Christ himself. Many, many things are thought to be the way to unity or the grounds of unity, but no. There's only one ground of unity, and that is Christ himself.

And where Christ is, there is, beneath and beyond whatever else may be present, there is unity. There's no doubt about it. May have a lot that is extra, the accretions, the things that are built upon that, which are not Christ, but get a way down through all that to the fundamental reality of Christ within by new birth from above.

And you've got something in common. There is the unity. Christ himself is the law of this new integration.

But it will depend upon how much of Christ, how much manifested unity there will be. That, of course, would be a terrible indictment, wouldn't it? Very much. Where there is disunity amongst the Lord's people, it would say, well, there's not enough of Christ.

If only there were more of Christ, that would not be. So it resolves itself into a matter of the greatness and the fullness of Christ. If what we have said and all the more that lies behind it is true, how very great Christ that he has the capacity for filling this universe.

And those are not just words. It's not just a wild statement. It can be borne out in various ways, which perhaps we ought not to take time to show this evening.

Except in one way. You know, you can take any manual of any subject or subjects in human knowledge, however great may be the manual, full and detailed and comprehensive, and you can master it. You can master it.

You can get the substance out of it so that it's in you and you can put the manual away and have no further need to refer to it. You've got it. It may be very vastly comprehensive, but you've got it.

You know all that is there. You can never do that with anything that relates to Christ. A little fragment of written ministry, which you can read in 15 or 20 minutes, like letter so-called to be Ephesians or Philippians or Colossians, read right through in so many minutes.

Yet, I'm exhausted over 20 centuries, and still deeper and fuller than all those 20 centuries I've ever been able to extract from it. It relates to Christ, and it takes more than all time to comprehend Him, to fathom Him. He's still beyond us.

Still beyond us. Vastly beyond us. He's a universe.

He has the capacity for fulfilling all things. He is inexhaustible. But not only in the matter of measure or degree, but in the matter of character.

It is not only that He is going to fill all things, but He is going to give character to all things. What a wonderful thing it is when the Lord Jesus gets in. The changes He makes in character.

And if it is true, as we have illustrated, that He is capable of filling all time and going beyond it, as to measure, He can change this whole universe with His character. He can give a character to all things, which is different, and which cannot be found in any other but Himself. We know that.

We know that. That where Christ is, truly, there's something different. All the prophets of men, all their teachers, all their religions, all their philosophies, wonderful as they may think them to be, they don't change the character.

They don't make this radical, constitutional difference in men. But He does. Therefore in Him is not only the measure, but the character of the coming universe.

It will take its nature from Him. He is capable of doing that. That is the gospel.

That there is not one remote figure, or point, or creature in this universe who cannot be changed by Jesus Christ and made different. He is the measure. He is the nature.

But He is also the criterion. Everything in this universe is going eventually to be judged by Him, according to Him. Not that He sits upon a judgment seat at some time and gathers all before Him and passes sentence objectively.

That's our mentality in thinking of the judgment. Let us understand that it is spiritual and that all things will be judged according to the measure of Christ that is there. According to how they measure up to Him.

He's the standard. He's the criterion. He is God's measuring life for everything.

And with God, all things, all things are judged in this way. What place have you given my son? What place could you have given him? What place did you have the opportunity of giving him? What place did all that was given to you make possible for him? What's the result? God will be righteous in His judgment. Men have had very, very little of Christ.

God will be righteous if they could not have more. But, you see, the much or the little, after all, comes back to this. It's Christ.

Christ who is the criterion of everything. All that then and so much more is found in this first fragment of the purpose to sum up all things in Christ. To gather together all things in Christ.

Then you come to the elect vessel. The elect vessel. That which we know by the name of the church.

What is the meaning of election, after all? For it is this church that is elected, that answers to this particular and peculiar thought in the mind of God from eternity. What is the meaning of election? We've gone far wide, I think, of the real answer to that question in the word of God. Only we did realize that election is... Only we did realize that election is related essentially to vocation and not salvation.

We'd be saved a lot of trouble. It is chosen according to the purpose in relation to a vocation. It is elect with a meaning.

That is not just to be saved and to be got to heaven. It's this ministry that governs election. This ministry is the ministry of something elected of God to fulfill it.

Get quite clear about that and get your minds free of other thoughts when that word election or foreordination or predestination rises at once focus upon this. It's purpose that is it, not just salvation. What is the purpose of the election? That's the nature of the election or the meaning of election.

It's vocation. What is the purpose of the election? Again, the purpose of the election is Christ. It's Christ.

Chosen in Him for this very purpose of being God's vessel and vehicle for the revelation of Jesus Christ in the nations and beyond in the heavenlies. I keep strictly, if you care to follow with the word, I keep strictly to the scriptures in all this. Now unto the principalities and powers in the heavenlies may be made manifest the manifold wisdom of God.

It's in the nations and it's over the nations that this vocation is to be fulfilled. It is Christ. We are, dear friends, chosen in Christ to reveal Christ.

To manifest Christ. To show what Christ is. Then what is the demand? If this is true, this is true.

The demand is found in one little phrase. Give diligence to make your calling and election sure. In other words, see to it that you are fulfilling your ministry.

That you really are in this ministry of Christ. So this ministry relates to the fullness of Christ. First of all, fill its vessel.

The vessel of the ministry. And then to overflow or pass beyond the vessel or through the vessel to the nations. What is required for this ministry? If this is what it is, what is required for it? Well, first of all, again keeping close to the word, it can only really be fulfilled on heavenly ground.

It is absolutely essential that the church stands on heavenly ground to fulfill this ministry. It is on the ground of the heavenly man. It is on the ground of a heavenly order.

As it is done in heaven was the phrase used by the Lord himself. It is on the ground of the Holy Spirit sent down from heaven. You see, in every way it requires heavenly ground.

Paul so constantly uses this phrase, in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus, in the heavenlies in Christ Jesus. Touch the earthly and the natural man and what happens? At once the integration changes to disintegration again. Let me put that another way.

Here is something that is raised up of the Lord, used of the Lord, and then man or men put their hand on it, take charge of it, begin to hold it and use it and govern it. What is the history of that? It is the history of all the divisions. At any rate, in most of the divisions amongst the Lord's people it can be traced to it coming down to the earthly man somewhere.

The touch of the earthly man. The earthly man in otherwise heavenly man. Always two sides to me.

When men get on to their earthly side and touch the things of God, division comes. The glory fades out. The fullness of Christ narrows down.

Spiritual poverty comes where there was once wealth. See, touch, touch the earthly man. Touch the earth itself.

And at once come into this realm of breaking up and dividing. Come down on to this earth level of things. And it is like that.

There is no oneness and integration on this earth. If you like to change the word earth for the world, all right. Touch this world.

Let the church come into touch with this world and what happens? It breaks up. It divides. It loses its spiritual fullness and its glory and its effectiveness and registration here.

It is exactly what is happening. Come down. Come down.

And I believe, dear friends, that if the letter to the Ephesians so-called means anything at all as it comes to its consummation, that great warfare in the heavenlies, if it means anything at all, it means this. The tremendous conflict that the church has for maintaining its heavenly position for all these forces of evil are bent upon forcing it down. Now, isn't that not true to your own personal experience? Pressing down, forcing down, dragging down.

It is this tremendous battle not to come down. It is essential that we maintain our heavenly ground and not come down. If we are to fulfill this ministry, you must keep off of all ground that is of man's making, forming, shaping, and constituting if you are going to have this fullness of Christ and minister it to his people.

A suggestion like that is enough, I think, without following it through. We are speaking about the ministry to which we are called, and it is an essential part of that ministry that we do not come onto man's religious, traditional, or historical, ecclesiastical ground. We maintain a spiritual position in the heavenlies, in Christ.

And as soon as we lose that position and become something down here, an institution, a sect, a denomination, an organization, anything down here, we'll lose our wealth. We'll lose our wealth. And we'll lose our glory, and we'll lose our measure of Christ.

We lose everything spiritual. And we pass into being what so many things have become. Just another thing down here amongst many things, very little different from the rest.

Oh no, the church of Christ is not that. It's not that. And if we say, well, where shall we find this? Does Ephesians still hold good? I verily believe, dear friends, with all my heart, that if we're in the right position, we'll find there the right and full resources of Christ.

Now, you say, how is all this to be? It's all perhaps very wonderful, but it's so much beyond us. How is it to be effected? And I don't want to be occupied with setting forth great ideas and truths and concepts. I am most concerned to solve some of the spiritual problems of this matter of spiritual fullness.

I take an illustration to try and help in this matter. You see, all this that we are thinking of, this ministry, is not going, in the first place, to be an objective thing at all. Here you come to this second letter to the Corinthians, and you find how subjective this ministry is.

You come to that on subsequent occasions, but God has shined into our hearts. It is not, first of all, an objective thing. You won't find this, in the first place, in an outward way.

You won't find this church in an outward way, here on the earth. No use going about looking for this kind of church. Where shall we find this kind of church that corresponds to Ephesians and so on? No use going around looking for something objectively like that.

You won't find it. You won't find it. You won't find this ministry in that objective way.

Maybe ministries that more or less approximate to this, but it's not to be found in the objective way, in the first place. How is it to be found, then? Perhaps I can best illustrate it in this way. Have you ever been inoculated? Have you ever had an injection? Well, of course, it depends very much upon what it is, but it is characteristic and usual with injections or inoculations that you get a reaction.

We say a flare-up. You have a bad time for a while. Something has been introduced into your system that is either a deficiency in your system, a supply to a deficiency, or something that is antagonistic to what is there.

And so, a battle ensues until that which has been introduced has got the mastery and subjected everything to itself and becomes the governing constituent in your system so that the old thing, the old thing against which the injection or the inoculation was made doesn't arise again and take the mastery. It

doesn't. Now, that's known to most of you to be quite true and quite a simple illustration.

But do you recognize that that is exactly what is happening in the spiritual constitution of the Lord's people? We are all defective in Christ. There's a terrible deficiency of Christ in us all, isn't there? And Christ is so other than we are. So different.

Really, this heavenly man is antagonistic to this earthly man. Introduce Christ into the life and it's not long before a battle rages as a flare-up. You have a bad time.

A bad time. You go through a bad time. Until that which has been introduced into your spiritual constitution or system gains the mastery.

And that old man comes under. That other thing is made subject to him. And he becomes the dominant constituent.

And that battle's over. Now, in thousands of ways and connections that's what happens. You'll have an injection for this and an injection for that.

An inoculation for one thing and another. All sorts of things. These are multiplying today to such a degree that you don't know where they're going to stop.

But there it is. But, you see, in our spiritual nature of constitution there are numerous things that have got to be brought into subjection to Christ. And that never takes place without a battle.

And the more of Christ that is going to come in the greater the battles will be. There's this antagonism for a time. Our nature does not take kindly to Christ.

Something in us that while we in heart want him there's something in us that doesn't like him. And it means a battle. Now, that is the sort of thing that changes, you see, the people of God.

And changes the church. Bring in Christ. And more of Christ.

And you bring in, first of all, tremendous reactions. A good deal of inward conflict and suffering until and until he has the mastery. There's a larger measure of Christ which is dominant.

I believe that is the real spiritual history of the church. It's like that. Church does go through these tremendous battles.

The Lord's people go through these times of stress. And it's all what used to be called in my young days, that the medicals won't have it now, growing pains. It's that increase of another character.

Another order of things. And it never takes place easily. Always a battle.

Related to some other measure of Christ. That may explain a lot for you. But I believe that is the way in which we come to the fullness of Christ.

That's the point. The way we come to the fullness of Christ is just like that. It just does not happen quietly and kindly and gently.

We only come to every little extra bit of Christ through some conflict, through some stress, through some flare-up, till he gets the upper hand. It is just that. You see, all things have got to be brought into subjection

to him.

And the very word subjection means that there are rival forces. There are enemy forces in us. There's a lot of subduing to go on in us.

But he has the power to subdue all things unto himself. He comes in, he will do that. Now, how then is this ministry to be fulfilled? It is by, first of all, a church in which Christ has the largest possible place, which possesses the largest possible measure of Christ.

That can only be as everything in us and in the church becomes subject to Christ. Only another way of speaking of his lordship, of his headship, of his absolute mastery. Like that.

You see, it opens up the word so much. You can think of the apostles themselves if you like. Take one amongst them, Peter.

Peter, the man who in the first place had the most, I think, that did not take kindly to Christ. Well-meaning and all that, but he was all the time rising up in himself to oppose something of Christ. This shall never come to be.

This shall never be. No. See, opposing Christ in himself.

But this terrific battle was set up in Peter as to who was to have the master. I believe that mastery was gained, you know, on that morning on that shore of the sea when Jesus said again and again, Lovest thou me? Lovest thou me? Lovest thou me? We have a very large measure of Christ in Peter afterwards. A very large measure.

But you can see the battle. The inward battle through which that man went in order to make room for Christ. And it was all along the line of absolute subjection to Christ.

Christ having the master. Being in the ascendant. And those things in the man subdued to Christ.

And in all things he might have the preeminence. It was the way of the fullness. It was the way of this ministry.

Oh, may the Lord go beyond what I am able to say to you, convey to you, and bring a mighty impression upon you that we are called, as with his church, with a great purpose, which only has its beginning here in time, in this life, will have its fulfillment, as Paul says, in the ages to come. In the ages to come. And to the ages of the ages we are called with that purpose.

The purpose is, and to begin now, to begin now, the manifestation of the greatness of Christ. The significance and meaning of Christ. Then, if we are to make our calling and our election sure, it is a matter of Christ in all things having a preeminence, an absolute mastery.

All things being in subjection to him in us and amongst us. Therefore, seeing we have this ministry, I say, can you go on? Perhaps you're feeling now, well, we will faint. It's too much.

We faint not, says he. We faint not. The Lord will fill all his prophets of grace in us.

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