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The Greatness of the Church

by T. Austin-Sparks

*First published in "A Witness and A Testimony" magazine, Jan-Feb 1948, Vol. 26-1.
Extract from "Four Greatnesses of Divine Revelation" - Chapter 8.*

There is a painful slowness amongst Christians to apprehend the great purpose and intent of their salvation, to know and to understand the nature of their high calling; and it is in this connection that there is a great divide between the people of God. Christianity at its best has very largely become a general thing a matter of being saved and of going on in a general way as Christians, but not recognizing that in God's mind we are saved with a mighty purpose, not just to be saved and then to be occupied with getting others saved, and stopping there. Both of those things are good; they are fundamental and essential, but they are only the beginning.

From that point something quite different begins, what Paul refers to here when he says, "I...beseech you to walk worthily of the calling wherewith ye were called"; and around that phrase, the *calling* wherewith ye were called, he gathers all these immense things about the Church; these immense things which, as to the backward aspect, reach far back over the ages; as to the upward aspect, "in the heavenlies", with a vocation which is now heavenly; and then the onward aspect, "the ages to come". These are phrases which indicate the calling wherewith we are called, but how few of us have really apprehended it!

We could say very much about the tragedy of the loss of that vision, the loss of that Divine revelation, and of the building up of something which has made it well nigh impossible for multitudes now to move into that calling, bound hand and foot as they are by a tradition and by a system of things which leaves responsible people not free, too much involved, too much involved for their very livelihood, to move into God's full thought.

The Church, as the Body of Christ, is the vessel chosen of God, appointed and revealed by God, to be the embodiment of the glory and greatness of Christ, the vessel, the vehicle, by which all that Christ is will be made known through the ages of the ages. The greatness of the work of Christ in His Cross indicates how great the Church must be. If Christ loved the Church and gave Himself for it, if the work of the Cross of the Lord Jesus is so great, is not that a further indication of how great the Church must be? It has by His own parable been called a "pearl of great price" (Matt. 13:46), and to secure it He, the Divine Merchant, let go all that He had, and He had an 'all' which no merchant in the history of this world has ever possessed, a wealth and a fullness, a glory which He had with God before the world was, something indestructible, great, and wonderful. Seeking goodly pearls, when He had found one of great price He sold all to get it. We cannot understand that; it is beyond us; but there it is, it is Divine revelation. And the Cross was the price of the Church. For some unspeakable reason, the Church stands related to God in value like that. Christ loved the Church, the Church of God which He purchased with His own blood. It is evidently a very great and wonderful thing.

Now we must look at some of those features of Christ which are taken up in the Church, in order that we may know what this Church is that we are talking about. What is it? Well, if it takes up the things which are true of Christ, then what is true of Him is, in the mind of God, to be true of the Church; and it *is* true of the Church which is in God's eye.

And the first feature of Christ is His eternal being, the eternal conception. He was before the world was; He was before the order of time was instituted in the establishment of those heavenly bodies by the government of which time exists, years and months, day and night, summer and winter. These are all governed by heavenly bodies, and these are time factors. Before they were, He was, for He created all things. That is true of Christ.

But the letter to the Ephesians says that that is true of the Church: "He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world....having foreordained us unto adoption as sons through Jesus Christ unto Himself" (Eph. 1:4-5). This letter to the Ephesians is not set in time, it will have its effect upon time matters, the practical matters of everyday life, of our walk and conduct here on this earth, but it is set in the timeless realm. It goes back, and it goes on; it bridges all time in the Divine conception. That is where this letter is set, and until we recognize the implications of that, we have no real apprehension of the Church; and when we do recognize that, what nonsense all this 'churchianity' becomes, how small and petty, and how we feel that from God's standpoint we are just playing at some game of churches when we make so much of what has traditionally come to be called 'the Church.' One real Divine glimpse of the Church and all that other becomes paltry, petty, foolish; and a mighty emancipation takes place inside of us, but it requires revelation.

Christ as the foundation, as the rock, as the basis of everything, is founded, planted, and rooted in eternity, and nothing that time can bring can affect that. He is outside of it all. He is over it all. He is beyond it all. Nothing that can come in, even with Adam's fall and all its consequences through history, can interfere with that. The Church takes that feature of the absolute stability of Christ. It is something outside of time, before the world was, chosen in Him. The stability of the true Church according to God's mind is the stability of Christ Himself. This thing, on God's basis, in God's realm is an immovable and indestructible thing. The Church embodies the eternity and indestructibility of His very life.

Christ passed through this world unrecognized, unloved, making the positive affirmation that "no one knoweth the Son save the Father" (Matt. 11:27). There is a mystery here. He is manifested as God in Christ, but in such a hidden way that it demands an act of God in specific revelation to see Jesus Christ. You cannot see Who Jesus Christ is truly unless God acts sovereignly and opens the

eyes of your heart. That has been demonstrated by His whole life here on this earth. When one apostle was able in a moment of revelation to say, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God," the rejoinder was: "Blessed art thou, Simon Barjonah; for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father" (Matt. 16:17).

And what is true of Christ is true of the Church. It is heavenly; it is unrecognized, unknown, unless God reveals it. I want you really to grasp this. I know in what a realm of helplessness it places us on the one side, and rightly so, it is as well that it is so; and therefore what it makes necessary on the other side: God must have a Church which exists on the basis of His own sovereign act of revelation. The purity of it demands that. If everybody could see and understand and comprehend, and the Church could be brought right down to the limited compass of human apprehension, what sort of Church would it be? The Church, in its heavenly character taken from Christ, is something that can only be entered by revelation, because it can only be known by revelation. "No one knoweth...." We can only state these facts. No teaching can accomplish it; we are powerless in the matter. All that is given to us is to state Divine facts; it is for God to reveal. But, thanks be unto God, He has revealed and He does reveal; and some of us can say He has shined into our hearts in this matter, and the revelation of Christ and of the Church has made an immense difference in every way.

God cannot be really known by the things which He says, however many they may be. There is such a difference between mental, intellectual apprehension and conception of God, and living, heart-transforming apprehension. God must come to us Himself in a living, personal way if we are to know Him livingly, actually. You may read a biography or an autobiography, and you may afterward say that you thereby know the person concerned; but how often it is true that when you actually meet that person, there is something that was not there in the book, and which makes all the difference. You were not really changed and transformed by reading the book. You had impressions, but they did not make any difference to you actually in your very life and nature; but you meet the person, and the impact of the person makes a deep impression and has a great effect. That is so often the case, but that is a poor illustration.

Now the greatness of the Church is here, that God has ordained and appointed that the Church now, in this dispensation, should be as the living Person of the Lord: where He can be found, where He can be met, where He can be touched, where He makes self-manifestation. Rome has the 'truth' regarding this, but has dragged it down on to a temporal, worldly level; but nevertheless the fact remains, He is found there, in the Church, and only in the Church. "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matt. 18:20). God can be met, found, touched there; there is the vehicle of His manifestation. So the Church is called to be here in this dispensation, and in the ages to come, the very Body through which God in Christ manifests Himself, makes Himself known. Is that the Church that we know, that is commonly called the Church? (Oh, no! But that is God's thought, and how different!)

I have been reading a book by Adolph Keller, a man who traveled all over the world to visit all churches, to see what could be done along the line of church union. I came on something like this in his book: "I must admit," he says, "that oftentimes when I sat in magnificent church buildings, with their stained-glass windows and carved organs, I was less conscious of being in the Church of Christ than when, for instance, I was in one of those Ukrainian peasant-rooms crowded with men and women who had come barefoot from afar to hear the Word of God. These poor little congregations and churches widely scattered in the hills of Yugoslavia, in the lonely villages of Wolhynia, in the coal-mining districts of Belgium, in the taverns and barns of Czechoslovakia, these churches truly humble us, because they show us again and again the true poverty and the true riches of Christ; and that in a way impossible in the securely established, self-sufficient church that we know today." Then

he makes this statement: "The entire Church no longer represents its nature as originally intended, neither is it able to do so."

How different from the Church of God's thought! The true Church is nothing less, in the intention of God, than Christ Himself present and going on with His work, now without those earthly limitations of His life before His death and resurrection. The Christ risen, ascended and exalted in all the fullness which God has put in, is now in the true Church, and that Church exists. I say, you cannot identify it; you can only see where two or three are gathered. You cannot say of this or that or some other thing called 'the Church' that that is the Church. No, the true Church is still this mysterious thing. It is Christ in active expression. How great is the Church if it is Christ! I say, we can only state the facts. There they are. What we have to do next is to pray to the Lord: O Lord, reveal the true Church and save me from the caricature!

There is one last word. It concerns that always present and always governing factor about Christ which is not taken sufficient account of, I think, in its meaning. You notice that when Christ was here His aspect was always the forward one. He was always thinking and talking of a time to come. That is a governing factor and feature of Christ. "In that day...." (Matt. 7:22). He is looking on, talking about a coming day. All the time His eyes are upon the distant horizon and He speaks of what will then be then you shall know, then you shall see, then all will be manifested, then all that has been so hidden and mysterious will be perfectly clear.

When you pass into the Epistles you find the same thing dominant in the case of the Church. Mighty things now, big possibilities now, big issues and responsibilities now; the Church is now, even now, unto principalities and powers an instrument of the revelation of the manifold wisdom of God (Eph. 3:10). But the onward look is prominent, governing everything: "...that we should be unto the praise of His glory" (Eph. 1:12); "that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (Eph 2:7); ".....unto Him be the glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus unto all the generations of the age of the ages" (Eph. 3:21). I am only bringing that in here at this moment with this object: to remind you of the tremendous end to which the Church is called. How great the Church is in the light of the vocation which it is to fulfill! What a great vocation!

We might spend much time considering what the calling of the Church is, or is going to be, in the coming ages; but we must be satisfied for the present with making this one observation. It is one thing to be a citizen, and a blessed citizen, of a noble country and of a noble king. There may be many blessings in that for which to be grateful, but it is an infinitely greater thing to be a member of the king's household and family, a member of the reigning house. And that is the calling of the Church: not only to be inhabitants of the land, but to be members of the reigning family. We are called with that calling, to be in that inner circle.

The Church is this specific company, elect from all eternity to all eternity, not just to be something in itself, to know satisfaction and gratification, but to be instrumental in the hands of God in serving Him in His universe throughout all the coming ages, in close relationship with His Throne.

How great the Church is!