

# **"ACCORDING TO CHRIST"**

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

***First published as a continuing editorial in***

***"A Witness and A Testimony" magazines,***

***Nov-Dec 1958 (Volume 36-6)***

***through***

***May-June 1959 (Volume 37-3).***

# **CONTENTS**

## **Editorial 1**

**Question: What is the Church, and what are the churches?**

## **Editorial 2**

**A look at foundations**

## **Editorial 3**

**The presence and expression of Christ Himself**

## **Editorial 4**

## Editorial One

(NOTE: During the many years of this spoken and printed ministry, very much has been said regarding the Church. This has led to not a few enquiries for advice from many who are in difficulty over this matter. Many of the enquirers are in responsible positions in the Lord's work. It is a sign of the times that there is such a very considerable revival of concern in relation to the Church. Many conferences on the subject are being held, many 'church' movements are afoot, and a very considerable literature is being published.

It is not our intention to enter the field of discussion and controversy in relation to this matter in general. The questions which reach us are almost entirely to do with the essential nature of a 'New Testament church': how such a church is formed, what are the principles which govern it, and similar questions.

There is a good deal of dissatisfaction and unrest among many sincere believers and servants of God, due largely to the poor or even bad state existing in so many churches. In not a few cases it is due to error in teaching, or disorder and sin. Many complain of spiritual starvation, and still many more are tired of mere formalism and spiritual death. While the perfect church has never yet existed on this earth, and while there always have been, and always will be, faults and weaknesses, or worse, there really is a need for a reconsideration, and a recovery, of the essential nature and function of the Church; and therefore, while making no claim to be expert in this matter, we feel constrained to offer what we feel we may have of light in this direction. This we propose to do in one or two editorials.)

### **Question: What is the Church, and what are the churches?**

Have we in the New Testament a clearly defined and completely set-out plan of the Church, its order, constitution, methods and work? Is there a concise and worked-out system in the nature of a 'blue-print', which is ready for copying and reproducing everywhere, and can be recognised as true to type in every place? The answer is decidedly No! But if we mean: Is there in the New Testament a revelation of God's mind as to the Church, in its nature, constitution, and vocation? it is no contradiction of the above when we say: Yes, decidedly Yes!

It is possible to take parts of the New Testament, as to doctrines, practices, work, methods, and order, to piece them together, and to frame them into a system to be adopted and applied. This is the mechanical or 'ecclesiastical' method, and it is capable of an almost endless variety of presentations, resulting in a very large variety of organized bodies, every one of which claims the New Testament for its

authority. This in turn issues in rivalries, competitiveness, controversy, and, eventually, in the presenting to the world of a Christianity divided into a vast number of independent and unrelated parts, far removed from 'all speaking the same thing'. The external and objective approach to the New Testament, with a view to studying it as a manual or text-book of Christian life, teaching and work, is a false one, a dangerous one, and - so far as any real spiritual outcome is concerned - a dead one. If God had meant successive generations of Christians to *IMITATE* the first and proceed on the mass-production principle, surely He would have seen to it that in some way a precise and unmistakable prototype existed, with adequate safeguards against all the confusion and misapprehension which has actually eventuated.

When men, Christian men, contemplate a project which is intended to last for a considerable tenure, they set down precisely their 'Principles and Practice', consisting of their doctrines, their purpose, their practices, their methods, and so on. God did not commission or allow His first Apostles to act in this way, so that we might have a Jerusalem or Antioch Blue Book or Manual for Christian churches. In the Divine mind it is all definite, fixed, precise, and permanent, but when we come to the New Testament, and especially the formative period as covered by the Book of the Acts, everything seems so fluid, so open, and so subject to proving. There is the most wonderful and sublime reason for this; but, before we come to that, let us point out that the approach to which we have referred above is the cause of more limitation, stagnation, deadly legality, than can be measured. In doctrine, it means that the doctrinal compass is boxed and no new light is allowed as to God's Word. Of course, this is the peril of orthodoxy. The intense desire to safeguard the Scriptures can lead to a sealing off against any new light from them as to meaning and interpretation, and this makes for a static spiritual position. Spiritual pride, bigotry, exclusiveness, suspicion, are some of the unholy brood of this legalism. If Satan cannot force to the one extreme of superiority to the written Word, he will try the opposite of bondage to the letter without the spirit.

The merely objective approach of which we have written may or may not be characterized by all of the above-mentioned features, but it will most certainly be limited in its spiritual power and results. It may very well result in the responsibility being made to rest upon men, so that all kinds of devices and expedients have to be resorted to in order that the work and institution can be maintained and furthered. Christianity has almost entire come to be such a thing now, and it is practically impossible for the vast majority of Christians - their leaders especially - to understand or even believe that God can do His work without committees, boards, machinery, advertisement, organizations, appeals, reports, names, deputations, patronage, propaganda, publicity, the

press, etc. Unless these things are present with a 'recognised' backing, the thing is not trusted, even if it is believed to exist.

We are aware that the foregoing is mainly negative, but it is necessary in order to lead to the positive, to which we now proceed.

We have said that the New Testament has within it a revelation, precise, definite, and full, as to God's mind for this dispensation, and that in that revelation there is an answer to all the questions of What? Who? and How? in all matters of the Church's constitution and vocation. What is that revelation? The answer is that it is not a system, as such, but a Person. That which in the New Testament is secondary, and a consequence, has now been made primary. That is, the results have been made the first and governing things, whilst that which comes before them as the cause is overlooked. If we will look again, we shall see that anything that came into being under the Holy Spirit's first activity was the result of a seeing of Christ. By that we mean what the Apostle meant, when he recorded the substance of his prayer for believers: "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ... may give unto you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him, the eyes of your heart being enlightened, that ye may know...", etc. It is a seeing of the immense significance of Jesus in the eternal and universal order.

With the Apostles that seeing was subsequent to the days of physical association. During the forty days after His resurrection it was like the dawning of a new day. First, those intimations, as when the uncertain light just passes over the heavens. Then more steady and certain rays, leading to the Day of Pentecost, when the sun appeared in full glory over the horizon dispelling the last shadow of uncertainty. On that day they saw Him as by an opened heaven. The mystery of the past was dispelled. The Bible lay open like a new book. They saw Him in the light of eternity. They began to see that, while He was the glorified, personal, Son of God, He was Himself the embodiment of a great, a vast heavenly and spiritual order and system. This *SEEING* was absolutely revolutionary. It was a crisis out of which a new world and a new creation was born. True to this fundamental principle, all that vast revelation, which has come down the centuries from and through the Apostle Paul took its rise from that crisis described by him as "It pleased God... to reveal his Son in me" (Gal. 1:16). 'I received it... by revelation of Jesus Christ' (vs. 12). All the implicates were in the crisis; the full content was a progressive and ever-growing revelation.

While there was some initial testimony the Apostles did not formulate in conference an enterprise, a mission, with all the related arrangements and organization. The new life forced off the old leaves and dressed the new organism with a new vesture *FROM WITHIN*. The might, energy and urge of the Holy Spirit within produced a *Way* and an order, un-thought-

of, unintended by them, and always to their own surprise. What was happening was really that Christ was taking form within them, individually and corporately, by new birth and growth. The believers and the companies were becoming an expression of Christ. Here, we come upon the essential nature of the Christian life and the Church.

What, in the thought of God do Christians exist for? What does the Church exist for? What do local churches exist for? There is only one answer. The existence and the function is to be an expression of Christ. There is nothing less and nothing more than that. Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end, and all between! Let that be the starting-point; let that be the governing rule and reality in *ALL MATTERS* of life and work, and see at once the nature and vocation of the Church. This vast, incomprehensible heavenly system, of which Christ is the personal embodiment, touches every detail of life, personally and collectively. But remember only the Holy Spirit sees and knows how it is so; hence, as at the beginning, there has to be an utter submission to and direction by the Lordship of the Holy Spirit. What the blood-stream is to the human body, the Divine life is to and in 'the Church which is His body'. What the nerve system is in the physical realm, the Holy Spirit is in the spiritual. Understand all the workings of those two systems in the natural, and you begin to see how God has written His great heavenly principles, first in the person of His Son, and then in His corporate Body. As an individual believer is the result of a begetting, a conception, a formation, a birth and a likeness, so, in, the New Testament, is a true local church. It is a reproduction of Christ by the Holy Spirit. Man cannot make, form, produce or, 'establish' this. Neither can anyone 'join' or 'enrol', or make himself or herself a member of this organism. First it is an embryo, and then a 'formation' after Christ.

So, all talk about 'forming New Testament churches' is nonsense. The beginning is in a seeing of Christ, and when two or three in one place have seen Him by the Holy Spirit, and have been "begotten again by the word of God", there is the germ of a church.

That, then, is the starting-point. But, how drastic that is, in the matter of reconsideration and recovery (see introductory 'NOTE'). If we did not know that, both in New Testament times and in the world *TODAY*, such churches existed, we should be right in viewing all this as either mysticism or idealism; as unreal and impossible; but it is only when there has not been that vision of Christ, and when there is a weddedness to a merely traditional system, that it can be so regarded.

We shall have to stop looking at the Church and churches, and look again, long and earnestly, at Christ; for to see Him by the Spirit is to see the Church.

Let us summarise what we have said.

1. This consideration is in answer to requests for advice as to the true nature of the Church, and especially of local churches.
2. The objective approach to the New Testament, with a view to formulating therefrom a pattern to be imitated, copied, and reproduced as 'New Testament churches', is wrong. It only either leads to a variety of conclusions, and therefore 'denominations' or results in something fixed, static and legalistic. This in turn leads to rivalries, suspicions, fears of 'sheep-stealing' and loss of 'members', etc.
3. The origin of the Church, and of churches, was a Holy Spirit revelation of Christ. As truly as Jesus said: "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father", so truly, although it does not put it into a similar precise sentence, the New Testament teaches that he that has seen Christ has seen the Church: for, although Christ retains His personality, individuality and distinctive identity, the Church is the corporate expression of Him.

So truly as there was a "mystery" as to Christ, in the days of His flesh, which could not be truly seen and recognised apart from an intervention of God, as giving sight to the blind, the Church as the Body of Christ demands a similar eye-opening work of the Holy Spirit for a potent and dynamic knowledge of its true nature and vocation. (Eph. 1:17, etc.).

The recognition of the Church is an event which is of such a revolutionary character as to emancipate from all merely traditional, historical and earthly systems: as see the Apostles and especially Paul.

- .4. The Church was not formed by any conference, convocation, organization, council or plan.

The Church, and likewise the churches, were *BORN*. A living seed - the truth concerning Jesus, in the power of the Holy Spirit - was deposited. The Word and the Spirit, united with the quickened spirit of believers, formed an embryo, and this produced an organism. The whole process was biological as opposed to mechanical. "Not of blood (bloods), nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13). The Church, and any true church, is as much a birth by the action of the Holy Spirit as is any true child of God. "Two or three" in Christ is a local-church nucleus.

5. The function and vocation of the Church, and of the churches, is to bring Christ into any location on this earth. The test is ever and only that of whether, and how much, Christ is found, met with, and ministered *THERE*. Anything and everything that does not truly bring Christ in, or minister to His increase, has no place in a true church.

*IN PURPOSE AND NATURE* the Church *IS* Christ, and so are the churches locally - no more, no less,

Having said that, before we go on to the constructive aspect of this matter, there are two important discriminations and distinctions to be made.

Firstly -

*The Church is not co-extensive with 'Christianity'.*

What is called 'Christianity' is an enormous conglomeration and mass of contradictions. The Church is no contradiction within itself, and it will not allow its name to cover any contradictions. Christ is neither divided nor contradictory. The thing that now goes by the name of 'Christianity' embraces between its two poles almost every conceivable complexion and inconsistency. At one pole it has the complexion of a liberalism which denies every fundamental truth - as to the person of Christ, the authority and trustworthiness of the Scriptures, the atoning work of the Cross, the bodily resurrection of Christ, and so on. But all this is included in the title 'Christianity'. At the other pole we have hard, cruel, bigoted legalism, which can resort to physical force and the use of lethal weapons for its defence or propagation. We know of instances of actual physical fights between leaders of what would be called 'evangelical' (or 'Fundamentalist') bodies. This also is included within the term 'Christianity'. Between the two extremes there are many things which bear a character that is the most violent contradiction of Christ.

No, the Church is not co-extensive with that confusion and Babel of tongues. Anything that refers to the Church in the New Testament shows it to be quite different from what - *IN GENERAL* - is called Christianity. "Christian", originally, just meant 'Christ one'. It is a master stroke of the great maligner and discreditor of Christ, on the one hand to have put that title upon so much that really will not bear it, and on the other hand to have confused the Church with it, so that the word "Church" can apply to almost anything; a building, an institution, a denomination, etc. The Church is holy, sacred, undivided, heavenly, and all of God. Not merely ceremonially sacred, but intrinsically so.

The second thing, by way of distinction, is that there is a -

*Difference between being in the Church and understanding what that means.*

It is not an essential difference, but one that can result either from an imperfect apprehension of Christ or from an inadequate instruction. The bulk of the New Testament is concerned with bridging this gap. That is, it is occupied with making believers understand what they have come into



through faith in Jesus Christ. This knowledge is shown to be of *VERY GREAT* and vital importance. Whatever may be the cheap and frivolous teaching of many, that the only necessity is to be 'saved' and everything is all right - a teaching which accounts for no small measure of the present deplorable condition in Christianity - the Apostles most positively did *NOT* take that view. They 'laboured night and day' that believers should know what they had come into. All the eternal counsels concerning Christ and God's eternal purpose as to Him are bound up with the Church. There are very many and very great values in a true Church life, that is, a true Body relatedness, and there can only be very great loss in not knowing or apprehending this.

That which is called 'Christianity' is not impregnable; the Church is! 'Christianity', so called, is not eternal; the Church is! 'Christianity' is going to be shaken to its collapse. The Church will not be prevailed against by the very gates of Hades. Someone who speaks with knowledge and authority has recently written: 'It takes no particular prophetic gift with a fair degree of accuracy to see what the outcome will be. >From some direction harsh reality will strike swift and hard and the millions who have taken refuge under the glass roof of popular Christianity will find themselves without a cover: then, bitter and disillusioned, they will turn in fury against the gospel, the Church and every form of religion. Cynicism, materialism and unbelief will blanket the world again as it did after World War I.' Those are hard words, but they are only another way of saying what is prophesied in Hebrews 12:26,27.

The Apostle Paul had given much time to Asia, and had 'not shrunk from declaring the whole counsel of God' there (Acts 20:27). Nevertheless afterward he placed on record the substance of his fervent prayer for those saints; and that prayer concerned that into which they were called in Christ, the context showing that the Church is the very complement - "fullness" - of Christ, without which He is by no means fulfilled. Although there have been, and are, distinguished Bible teachers who hold that not all born again believers are in the Body of Christ, it is not necessary to hold that view to see that the New Testament not only teaches, but thunders that it is imperative that all born again believers should come to "full knowledge", and *THAT RELATES TO CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH*. There is nothing in all the realm of Divine revelation that has suffered such furious and many-sided antagonism from the forces of evil as the knowledge of the true nature of the Church. This Paul has clearly indicated at the end of that immense document on this subject - 'The Letter to the Ephesians'. Nothing has suffered so much confusion and misapprehension. This is itself significant, and indicates how important it is, and how necessary it is, to have a right and true understanding. It would be well-nigh impossible to describe what a tremendous impact would be made upon this world and the kingdom of darkness by a true

realisation and expression of the Church. It would be no less an impact than that of the very throne of Christ, as exalted "far above all". There is also made clear that to believers who have their life on a corporate basis there are many and real values, as contrasted with the weakness, poverty, and perils of mere individualism.

In New Testament times all hell rose up to prevent the local churches from coming into being. The significance of the presence of the Apostles in any city was fully recognised by the evil forces, and they - the Apostles - had either to be driven out or killed. The very existence of a local church was a testimony to, and an embodiment of, Christ's victory and authority over the evil powers. When the Church was born out of such travail, its spiritual life must by any means be shortened. Like Moses at the hands of Pharaoh, and Jesus at the hands of Herod, the babe must be slain. Someone or some few will have to travail initially (and maybe, as with Paul, "again") for churches which are a true representation or embodiment of Christ. The significance of Christ in any place is too great to go unchallenged, and no form of opposition will be left unused in order to prevent or to discredit.

To be able to go on 'happily' and tranquilly in worldly favour is no testimony to spiritual significance. The contemplation of 'New Testament churches' must take these facts into account.

## Editorial Two

The first part of this consideration has been a general survey and statement as to the nature and purpose of the Church (universal) and the churches (local). We proceed now to look at foundations, but some things already said need elucidating and enlarging, and the matter now to be considered will serve this purpose, and touch vitally the beginnings of the Church in both its aspects, the universal and the local. At a point we made a statement which, if not rightly understood, could lead to a false position and to unfortunate results. It was this: 'The recognition of the Church is an event which is of such a revolutionary character as to emancipate from all merely traditional, historical, and earthly systems: as see the Apostles, and especially Paul.'

How important it is that that should be kept in the context. In other words, how necessary it is that the 'recognition' should really be an *EVENT*. There are many who 'break away', and become 'free-lance' people or movements, on any other ground or occasion than a spiritual crisis of seeing the *POSITIVE* way of the Lord. This often leads to more limitation and negation than was found in the position which they have left. It is true that Paul, at one point, came to a definite crisis over Judaism, and as from that day said: "Lo, we turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46b). But that is not how he, or the other Apostles, came into the Church. Something happened inside before it happened outside. Their spirits went ahead of their bodies or reason. They inwardly migrated; the Holy Spirit took them even where they had not contemplated - or perhaps intended - going. It was all a spiritual movement, not something of men. It was the Holy Spirit inculcating the significance of Christ.

We are now brought to those more positive features and principles of a Divine movement. The first of these is far from easy to state without the risk of misapprehension. Even the very words used are open to a false interpretation. This is because we are in the presence of one of the many paradoxes with which the Bible abounds. The paradox here is that of Christ satisfying the heart, and yet the Spirit reaching on and ever on. Nevertheless, when rightly understood, this first feature is perfectly clear throughout the Bible, and clearly seen in all God's movements. Since the very constitution of man, from his first digression, is always to digress - and history is one long story of human digression from God's way - all God's return movements have been the result of another element powerfully at work. This element is what we may call-

### *The Divine Discontent.*

We must very heavily underscore the word DIVINE! While 'The word of the Lord' may have come to Patriarchs, Prophets, Judges, Apostles, resulting in a commission and a mandate, it is very easy to discern that,

either before or by that word, there was found in them an unrest, a dissatisfaction, a sense that there was something more in the intention of God. Inwardly they were not settled and satisfied. Maybe they could not define or explain it. They did not know what they wanted. It was not just a discontented disposition or nature. It was not just criticism, or querulousness, or 'disgruntledness', a spirit of being 'agin the government', as of a malcontent. *GOD* was not satisfied, and He was on the move. These sensitive spirits, like Abraham, and Moses, and Samuel, and Daniel, and Nehemiah, and a host of others in every age - Old Testament, New Testament, and since - have been God's pioneers, because of an inward link with His Divine discontent.

Of course, this is one aspect of all spiritual progress, but it is very true of every new thing of God. We shall yet lay down the basis of the difference between natural and spiritual, human and Divine, discontent, but for the moment we are concerned with the fact and the principle. If this discontent is a truly Divine activity, it will not be a matter of mere human frustration. It will have nothing to do with natural ambition or aggressiveness. It will resolve into a sheer issue of spiritual life or death. It will become a soul-travail.

Personal and worldly interests will fail to govern. What is politic from the standpoint of advantages in this life will fail to dictate the course. There may be a Divine restraint as to time, but the inevitable ultimate issue is known deep down. A crisis is known to be imminent, and the issue is one of obedience to the way of the Spirit, or surrender to policy. If the spirit is pure, and the life in God selfless, there will be a growing sense of 'not belonging', of having already moved on, or being out with the Lord, and it is only a matter of being 'obedient to the heavenly vision'.

How often, when we have come into something new of the Lord, we have been able to say: 'This is what I have been looking for and longing for. I did not know what it was, but this answers to a deep call in my heart which has kept me dissatisfied for years'. So, just as the confession or salvation of an individual is always with the sense of having come home, a local church should be to the company a coming home, the supply of a deep need, the answer to a deep longing; just 'my spiritual home'. The spirit has been on a spiritual journey and quest, and now it has found - or is beginning to find - the answer. This quest will never reach its end until we are all at Home at last; but *SOMETHING* directly in line with the end, and of the very essence of the full, should be found in the local 'family' representation.

Have we made it clear? Do you see that 'churches' should not be just congregations, preaching places, or places for religious observances? They should be, in their inception, constitution, and continuation, the answer to God's dissatisfaction; that which provides Him with the answer

to His age-long quest in the hearts of all concerned. If there is one thing that God has made abundantly clear, it is that He is committed to the fullness of His Son, Jesus Christ. That fullness is to find its first realisation in the Church, "which is the fullness of him". Therefore God will only commit Himself to that which is in line with that purpose. As we have said elsewhere, it can be taken as an axiom that, if we are to find God committing Himself, it is essential to be wholly in line with His object at any given time.

But God *MUST* have a clear and free way. The Church and the churches are not now the starting-point of God, although they should stand very near to it. Some serious work has to be done before there can be a true expression of the Church in any locality. So, a cursory glance through the Bible will make it clear that the very door to the House of God was the altar. It barred the way, and at the same time led the way, to the Sanctuary. In the New Testament, of course, it is Christ crucified in direct line with Pentecost, the Church, and the churches. The Cross bars the way and points the way.

But when the Church is reached (so to speak), that is not the end of the work of the Cross. When we have come in, the Cross still governs. Thus it comes about that, in the New Testament, we have a very great deal about the Cross *IN* the Church and the churches. It is quite clear that, when spiritual progress toward the ultimate fullness of Christ was arrested or impeded, or when things became defiled or disordered, the Holy Spirit, through the Apostles' letters, or by a visit, brought in the Cross with fuller meaning or stronger emphasis. This can be seen immediately, when we read such letters as those to the "Romans", "Corinthians", "Galatians", "Ephesians", "Philippians", "Colossians", and "Hebrews", with the Cross as the key. It is back to Christ crucified that the Spirit invariably leads or calls, when purity, truth, life, power, and liberty are in question.

What, then, is the particular relationship of the Cross to the Church, and to the churches themselves?

Undoubtedly, the Cross says that in any true expression of Christ, individually and collectively (which is the sole object of their existence), there is no place for man by nature! Christ crucified goes beyond the door, which is atonement, justification, righteousness as acceptance through faith. Christ crucified is, in representation, the devastation of the whole race of the old creation, with its nature. The agonized cry of God-forsakenness, the accompanying signs in a darkened sun, earthquake and rending rocks, all comprised the mighty 'NO' of God and of Heaven to that creation. That was the all-inclusive climax of every pointer by death through the past ages.

The death of Christ was infinitely more than the martyrdom of Jesus. It was universal and eternal. In that all-comprehending veto was involved every realm affected and infected by Satan's corrupting influence and touch. To bring back into any sphere of God anything that lies under that ban is, on the one side, to deny and contradict the Cross; and, on the other hand, sooner or later to meet certain devastation. This was very early demonstrated, as a sign-instance, in the case of Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5), as well as by others in 'Acts' and at Corinth who intruded natural reasoning, passions, and behaviour into the realm of the Holy Spirit's jurisdiction. It is as though the Holy Spirit took hold of the Cross and smote them to death, or, in some cases, very near it.

There is very much tragic history contained in what we have here said; not least the weakness, reproach, confusion and ineffectiveness of the Church and the churches. The natural man serves himself of the Church. In it he displays his importance, his lust for power, his craving for self-expression (very often in ministry itself), and many other aspects of his selfhood - that Satanic thing which was begotten in the race when the supreme 'I' gained man's will for an act of spiritual fornication; for that is what it proved to be.

In the churches, it is all too often - and too much - that we meet people themselves, and not supremely Christ. At the beginning, the essential thing, as we shall see more fully presently, was *SPIRITUAL* men, as standing over against the 'natural man'. As the Church universal rests solely upon the foundation of Christ crucified, buried, and raised, so the churches must take their character from the foundation. Every member must be a crucified man or woman. Every minister must be a crucified man, and *EVIDENTLY* so. No man should preach on any other ground than that he is compelled by the Holy Spirit. He should have no *NATURAL* liking for preaching. Preaching ambition should be crucified! We verily believe that before a true church-expression can emerge, the foundation of the Cross must be deeply and truly laid with devastating effect upon all 'flesh'.

But, if the Lord means to have such an expression, the applying of the Cross will explain the meaning. This will not, and, in the nature of things, cannot, be all done at once. The movement toward fullness is progressive. So, again and again, that movement is marked by the fuller adjustments, releases, cleansings, of new and deeper works of the Cross. For greater fullnesses of Christ, there must be deep despair of any virtue, ability, resource, other than Christ risen and present in the Holy Spirit. We cannot 'form' or 'found' churches like this, but the Lord can bring into being a nucleus of well-crucified leaders, building therewith and thereon. If we put together Matthew 16:18 and John 12:24, we shall see that the first is a declaration of purpose and intention; the second is the

way in which it would come about. That way is the organic way, *i.e.* through death and resurrection, in which every grain shares, and to which all the grains, severally and corporately, are a testimony.

### Editorial Three

The occasion of these editorials is a widespread and serious exercise concerning the nature of the local expression of the Church. As we pursue this enquiry we are getting ever nearer to the heart of the matter. The fragment at the head is, we trust becoming clearer as to its real significance for every local representation, from the "two or three" gathered into the Name, to whatever greater number there may be. Let us, then, bring it right back to this: it is not an expression or representation of some *THING*, even be it called 'The Church', as extra to or apart from Christ, but the presence and expression of Christ Himself. To this essential reality we now apply ourselves along one more of the lines which meet in Him.

#### **PETER AS REPRESENTATIVE**

We shall all agree that, while the full revelation of the Church has come through Paul, Peter was the point at which both the intimation was given (Matt. 16:18) and the actuality broke in (Acts 2). While much - too much - has been made of this by historic ecclesiasticism, we do agree that Peter was in an outstandingly significant place in the beginning of the Church in this world. So we are going to look at Peter with a view to getting to the most fundamental factor of all in the Church and the churches.

When Peter sat down to write his circular letter to "the elect, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia", he began with a doxology. That doxology hinged upon the living hope springing up with the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. Peter, perhaps more than all men, had cause for a doxology over the resurrection of Jesus!

But we take Peter as representative of all those who had become followers of the Lord Jesus in the days of His flesh; not only of the twelve, but evidently quite a large number beyond the twelve. There were the seventy; and, beyond the seventy, many more who followed Jesus, and had some attachment to Him. Peter can be taken as, in a very real sense, representative of them all.

#### **THE DEVASTATION OF THE CROSS**

We are thinking at this moment particularly of the *EFFECT* of the Cross upon him, and upon them all. The utter devastation, and then the despair, that the Cross of the Lord Jesus brought upon them. For we are told they were 'all scattered abroad'; and we know how, even before the Cross became an actuality, any reference to it brought a terrible reaction. From time to time the Lord did just make some mention of His coming death, and, as He did so, many went away, followed no more with Him (John 6:66). Then again, others said, "This is a hard saying; who can



hear it?" (5:60). Apparently off they went as well. The very thought and prospect of the Cross was impossible of acceptance. When it came, Peter, as the very centre of that whole company, is found most vehemently denying, with a terrible denial, any association with Christ - just because of the Cross; and they all shared that, even if not in word and in the same form of expression, for we are told that 'they all forsook him and fled' (Matt. 26:56). And He had said to them: 'You will all leave Me' (John 16:32) - and it became true.

Then we meet them after His crucifixion. We meet those two on the Emmaus road, the very embodiment of despair. For them, everything had gone, was shattered. All their hopes, and their hope, were eclipsed - 'We had trusted...', or 'We had hoped that it had been He that should redeem Israel' (Luke 24:21). Now, everything was gone, and the hope laid in His grave.

From time to time we meet Thomas, and we know what Thomas thought about the Cross. He again was in the grip of an awful despair and hopelessness - loss of faith, loss of assurance. As we move through those forty days after the resurrection, we find the Lord repeatedly having to upbraid them, rebuke them, because of their unbelief. 'They believed not', it says (Mark 16:11,13,14). 'Some doubted' (Matt. 28:17). We can see what a shock the Cross had been. I have not used too strong a word when I have said that the Cross was nothing less than a devastation for every follower of the Lord Jesus. And right at the heart of them all was Peter; we could say that it was all concentrated in him. It must have been, in view of what he had done. Put yourself in his place, if you can, and see if you would have any more hope for anything, or for yourself. No!

### **THE ONE SUPREME ESSENTIAL**

Now, there were forty days of this: forty days of appearances, disappearances, of coming and going; a build-up, steadily, of the fact that He was risen; overcoming day by day that despair and that unbelief; building up a new hope. But even after forty days of all that, the most vital thing is still lacking. You might think, 'Well, given all that, they have enough to go on.' But no: the most vital thing, even at that point, is still lacking. What is it? It is *CHRIST WITHIN!* All that - yes! but not *CHRIST WITHIN* - yet. Hence the restraint: 'Tarry ye in Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high' (Luke 24:49). 'Don't move yet. With all that you have, you really have not yet got the vital thing, the essential thing.' And that thing is *Christ IN you, the hope of glory*. Christ *IN* you!

That is why the apostles were so particular as to converts receiving the Holy Spirit before ever they felt assurance about their conversion. Thus, there were all the reports - there was no reason to believe they were false

reports, mere rumours - about things happening in Samaria. Had not the Lord said that they would be witnesses unto Him in Samaria (Acts 1:8)? The report comes back of things happening, of people turning to the Lord, real conversions taking place in large numbers. Why not be satisfied with the report? It is a good report, and there is surely no reason to doubt it. But no; the apostles are not just satisfied with that. They sent down from Jerusalem, and when they were come down, they laid their hands upon them, that they might receive the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:14-17). We see again and again, how that happens. For them, things were not really settled until they were sure that Christ was on the *INSIDE* - that Christ was *IN* them; which is saying the same thing as 'receiving the Holy Spirit', the Spirit of Jesus. That, I say, is why the Lord said, 'Tarry; don't move yet!' And that is why the apostles were so meticulous on this matter of 'receiving the Holy Spirit'.

That, too, is why the Holy Spirit gave evidences, in those times, that He had come within. We believe that this book, the Book of the Acts, is a book of fundamental principles for the dispensation. When principles are being laid down in the first instance, God always bears them out with mighty evidences that they are true principles - that these are governing things for all time. God puts His seal upon them. So, when they received the Spirit, there were the evidences of the Spirit. They spoke with tongues; mighty things happened. It was clear to all, without any doubt whatever, that the Spirit was on the inside; Christ had entered in. That universal Christ, transcending all human language; that Christ of Heaven, transcending all earthly things - He had come in, and the evidences were given.

There is no mistaking this, that the matter of *CHRIST WITHIN* is the fundamental essential of Christianity. You may have the mightiest facts - the mightiest facts of His birth, of His marvelous life, His death, His resurrection - and they are the mightiest of facts - you may have them all, and may all be im-potent, non-potent, until He is inside! That is a tremendous statement, but it is borne out by at least this threefold truth: Tarry - don't move yet; the essential has not taken place after all! Make sure; leave nothing to chance let it not be just an emotional revival in Samaria! Whatever there may seem to be on the outside, to prove that something has happened, make sure that it has got inside! Make sure that Christ is *IN* - the Holy Spirit is *IN*! Make sure! For, as we shall see as we go on, you may have so much - and then, that vital thing being lacking, there may be calamity, as with them.

This mighty hope does not rest merely upon historic grounds - that is, upon the ground of the historic Jesus. This mighty hope rests upon inward reality - Christ in you! That is super-historic! And for the full, full meaning - the 'mystery which hath been hid from all generations' - it has

been there through *ALL* generations - 'but is now made known, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory' - we have to go to Paul.

### **THE INSUFFICIENT FOUNDATION**

So much for a general approach to the matter. Let us now in greater detail consider Peter, and the others whom he undoubtedly represents.

Firstly, then, as to *THE HOPELESSNESS*, ultimately, *of a merely outward association with Christ*, however sincere. There is no question about the sincerity of Peter or of any of those followers. They were sincere; there was a devotion to Jesus; their motives could not be called into question; it was well meant - there is no doubt about it. They had left all and followed Him; and to follow Jesus of Nazareth in those days involved them in a considerable amount of trouble, at least with the high-up people, and the prevailing system. Their association with Him undoubtedly meant something.

Moreover, while perhaps they were not able fully to see and understand; while they were not in the full light of who He was - the *FACT* of who He was was present with them.

For instance, there is the fact of the *INCARNATION* - the *FACT* of it: that this One amongst them was God incarnate, was the very Son of God, was God come down from Heaven to dwell in human form. There is the fact. They were in closest touch with that fact every day of their lives.

Then, there was the fact of His *PERSONALITY*: *and* there is no avoiding this, that that was a personality! I mean, there was a Presence where He was, that was different; that made itself felt, that registered. His was a very, very impressive Presence, beyond that of anyone else with whom they had any association, or of whom they had any other knowledge. There is a mystery about this Man: you cannot fathom Him; you cannot explain Him; you cannot comprehend Him: He is more; He is different. And wherever He comes, His Presence has an effect, and a tremendous effect. The *FACT* of His personality!

And then, although we do not know how far it went, there was the fact of *MARY* and her secret. We do not know to how many she spoke of her secret; we are told that she 'hid all these things in her heart' (Luke 2:19,51). But we do know that some knew about it. We know that she told Elisabeth all about it; and Zechariah knew it; and John the Baptist knew Mary's secret. She was there with them all. There is the *FACT* of Mary and her secret - without pressing that too much; but it is there.

Then there is the fact of the *MIRACLES* - we cannot very well get away from them. Miracles in the realm of the elements - the sea and the wind; miracles in the realm of nature - as our hymn says: 'It was spring-time

when He took the loaves, and harvest when He brake'. Miracles in the realm of sickness and disease, and even death: His healing, and His raising from the dead, such as the son of the widow of Nain. These were *FACTS*. And then, in the realm of the powers of evil - muzzling demons and casting them out, and delivering the demon-possessed. These were all facts present with them. It is a tremendous accumulation of evidence.

Further, the fact of the *TEACHING*: that, without special education, He bewildered, confounded and defeated the authorities of His time - all the men of information and knowledge, the scribes, the lawyers, the best representatives of the intellect of Jewry. They picked out on occasions their best intellects, to go and try and catch Him in His words; and these very men had to ask the question: 'Whence hath this Man this, having never learned?' (John 7:15). There was the *FACT* of His teaching.

There is a tremendous build-up. What a situation! They had all that (and how much more that embraces!) - and yet, whilst being in possession of that whole mass of mighty facts and realities about Him, and whilst living in the closest association with Him, it was possible for them to know all the havoc and the despair of the Cross. I venture to say that you and I would probably think that, if we had only a bit of that, we should be safe forever; never have any reason whatever to doubt our salvation. And they had it all, and yet here we have them after the Cross in abject despair. I have not exaggerated; I do not think one could exaggerate in this matter. When it came to the supreme test, all that did not save them; there was lacking the one essential to make it all vital, to make it the very triumph in the trying hour. That one essential is Christ - *THAT* Christ - in you. So long as all that is still objective, on the outside, though you may be in the closest association with it all, there is yet something lacking. And that lack may spell disaster, for it did with them.

By the resurrection a new hope was born; by the resurrection a new power came into the world and human life; by the resurrection the way was opened for that Christ to change His position from Heaven - from outside - into the inner life of the believer. It has all got to be 'Christ *IN* you, the hope of glory'. This is just the essential nature of this dispensation in which we live. In the former dispensation, the Spirit moved from the outside *UPON*. Jesus said: 'When He is come, He shall be *IN* you.' That is the change of dispensations; that is the character of this present dispensation - the Spirit within. What is the secret of the Church's power? What is the secret of the believer's life, strength, persistence, endurance, triumph against all hell and the world? What is the secret of ultimate glory? It is Christ *IN* you; in other words, that you have really and definitely *RECEIVED* the Holy Spirit.

How important this is! - that you and I shall *KNOW* that our Christianity, our faith, does not rest upon even the greatest historic facts, but that we

KNOW that Christ is inside; we KNOW that we have received the Holy Spirit. That is the secret of everything.

Let us carry this a little further, and consider the next thing: *the hopelessness of work for Christ without Christ within.*

'He called unto Him whom He Himself would; and He appointed twelve, that they might be with Him' (Mark 3:13,14); and He chose seventy, and sent them forth, and gave them power over unclean spirits, over all manner of diseases, and they went forth, and they returned with great joy saying, 'Even the demons are subject unto us in Thy Name' (Luke 10:1,17). Tremendous! 'Heal the sick' - yes; 'raise the dead; cast out demons; freely ye have received, freely give' (Matt. 10:8). And they returned with great joy: it was done; they had seen it! And you have this picture after the Cross of these same people - the *SAME PEOPLE* - devastated! You say: Is that possible? Is that real? If you know your own heart, you will know it is possible. But what is the meaning of this?

In the case of the 'twelve' and the 'seventy' we have set forth a strange, wonderful, and almost frightening fact. It is that, within the vast scope of the sovereign rule of God - which is only another definition of the 'Kingdom of God' - within the sovereign rule of God, many things obtain which only *EXPRESS* that sovereignty. They are not of the essential and permanent essence of God Himself, as in the nature of things; they are the *WORKS* of God. I say, within that vast scope of His rule and His reign, God has countless instruments of His sovereignty - be it official, be it providential - which He just uses in His sovereignty in relation to His end. There is a purpose to be served, an end to be reached, concerning His Son, Jesus Christ: it has got to be made known in this world that the Kingdom of God has drawn near, and that Jesus Christ is the centre of that Kingdom. And, in order to make that known, God will employ sovereignly even the Devil himself! His sovereignty gathers into it many, many things which are not essentially of the nature of God.

Perhaps you have been amazed sometimes, and perplexed and bewildered, why God should use that, and that and that; and such and such persons. You have been inclined to say: 'It is all contrary to what I believe to be necessary to God for His work. I see that the Bible says that instruments have got to be according to God's mind in order to be used.' But history does not bear that out. As I say, He has used the Devil, and the Devil is not according to God's mind. There is a sovereignty of God spread over in relation to His end.

But when you have said that, it is a frightening fact when you come to the work of God. I mean this - that we may be working for God, and doing many mighty things as employees of the Kingdom of God, the rule of God, and then, in the end, be cast away! In the end, we ourselves

might just go to pieces. Here it is - this strange thing, that these men went out, twelve and seventy, with this 'delegated authority' - this *DELEGATED* authority - and exercised it, and mighty things resulted; and then these same people are found, after the Cross, with their faith shattered; nothing to rest upon. What does it say?

### **THE DEFICIENCY MADE GOOD**

Thank God, the book of the Acts transforms the whole situation! Because the book of the Acts brings in this mighty new factor: that Christ, who had delegated the authority, is now indwelling as the authority Himself. And the works now are mighty works, but they are not just works *FOR* the Lord - they are the works *OF* the Lord. It all goes to prove this tremendous fact: that it is "Christ *IN* you" that is the indispensable necessity for life and for work. All that they had in their association with Him, and then all that they were allowed to do by His delegated authority - all fell short of being something that could make them triumphant in the hour of the deepest testing. And that is something!

Paul put his finger on it at Ephesus, if you remember, when he said: 'Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?' (Acts 19:2). It was ever the apostles' question, and ever their quest. They knew afterward, if they knew anything at all, that nothing, *NOTHING*, will stand up to anything, save Christ Himself indwelling.

Now, we can, of course, take that both ways. There is the negative side - the almost frightening possibility that there should be all that, and then disaster at the end. But let us take it positively. What a marvelous thing it is that we are in the dispensation when the one thing, above all others, that God will make true, is "Christ in you" - Christ *IN* you! No wonder Peter burst forth with his doxology: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who... hath begotten us again unto a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead"! You need to be Peter to be able to speak as he spoke; to have gone through the awful shattering, into that unspeakable depth of despair, loss of hope, to be able to say "a living hope" - a *LIVING* hope! And what is it? "Christ *IN* you, the hope of glory."

No; there is no hope for us individually; there is no hope for our companies, our churches, our assemblies; there is no hope for Christianity - unless and until the living Christ, with all the tremendous significance of His coming into this world, of His life here, of His Cross, of His resurrection, has come, by the Holy Spirit on to the inside of things, of people, and churches; until it is "Christ *IN* you". All the other may be there - the creed, the teaching; you may, with all sincerity and honesty, say: 'I believe in God the Father...' and so on - it may all be there, and yet there may be disaster where that thing is the most frequently declared.

It is the impact of Christ that matters. In those early days He could not be present without it being known; and that is the thing that you and I need; that is the secret of the Church's power. It is the presence of Christ on the 'inside' of you and of me, and of all of us as people together; "this mystery *AMONG THE NATIONS*, which is Christ in you". You are among the nations; and the deepest, the profoundest, the most inexplicable thing is "Christ in you", as you are amongst the nations, "the hope of glory."

It is a question of *HOPE*. It can be touched by a deep and terrible despair; it can see disintegration and disruption. What we need is a mighty, mighty hope, a living hope - that is, Christ, Christ risen, Christ Himself! We need to get beyond even the resurrection, to where we are able to say: It is Christ present; to what Christ means, as *WITHIN* us.

## Editorial Four

In concluding this brief series of editorials, for the time being, we are going to sum up this matter of the Church and the churches by looking more seriously at the great crisis or turning point which we have in the New Testament.

From what we can discern in the relevant literature, it would seem that very few indeed - and some of these only indistinctly - have recognised the tremendous nature of the events centring around Stephen (Acts 6, 7). A more careful consideration of Acts 7 in the light of the whole context of the New Testament will lead to some very deep and far-reaching conclusions.

In the first place, through Stephen there is given retrospective confirmation and explanation of some of the most momentous and critical things said by the Lord Himself in the days of His flesh. Too little account has been taken of those intimations or declarations of His that with Him and resultant from Him an entirely new economy and different order was imminent.

In the second place, with Stephen there was the forcefulness of Heaven breaking in with two mighty meanings. One, shock-treatment to the Church, which, with its first leaders, was settling down to a semi-Judaistic Christianity, with the Temple, synagogues, and Jerusalem as an accepted system. The other, the Divine foreknowledge and prediction that in the approximate period of forty years (a significant period) the whole of that centralized and crystallized order would be shattered, and scattered like the fragments of a smashed vessel over the earth, never again to be reconstituted in the dispensation.

Stephen, in his inspired pronouncement, did some devastating things. He first traced the Divine movement from Abraham, along a *SPIRITUAL* line (back of all temporal and material instrumentalities), to Christ, showing that what was in the Divine mind throughout was a spiritual and heavenly system and order, culminating in Jesus, the Christ. He next showed that historically the people concerned had failed to recognise that spiritual meaning, that heavenly concept, and had done two things. They had made the earthly and temporal an end in itself, and given fullness and finality to it. Then they had persecuted, cast out, or killed those who, seeking to make the spiritual and heavenly paramount, had rebuked their shortsightedness and condemned their unspirituality. According to Stephen this was a vicious and evil force that was at work even when the symbols and types of the heavenly were being *FORMALLY* and ritualistically practised.

The effect of Stephen's pronouncement, and the significance of his



anointing with the Holy Spirit - as will be seen from some of his clauses - was to wipe out and set aside the entire Old Testament order, as represented by and centred in the Temple at Jerusalem. The significance of the advent of Christ was the displacing of what was - and is - of time, by that which is eternal; the displacing of that which is of earth by that which is of Heaven; the displacing of the temporal by the spiritual; and the displacing of the *MERELY* local by the universal. The cult of Israel was finished for the age.

One, perhaps supreme, factor in the significance of Stephen was what he saw at the end and said with almost his last breath: "Behold, I see the heavens opened; and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God" (7:56). Here we have, the central and basic reality of true New Testament Christianity, of the Church and the churches - Jesus on the right hand of God. The government, the authority, the headquarters, vested in the ascended Lord, and centred *IN HEAVEN*; not in Jerusalem, nor anywhere else on earth. Then, this is the only occasion on which, after Jesus Himself had used the title, He is spoken of as Son of Man. This is *NOT* the Jewish title, it is the universal designation. In Daniel we have the Son of Man as receiving from God "dominion, and glory and a kingdom, that *all the peoples, nations, and languages should serve him*" (Dan. 7:14). That is the meaning of Stephen's vision and utterance.

The Jewish rulers and Stephen's accusers were quick and shrewd enough to recognise the implications, for they had no less and no other import than that the 'Temple made with hands' was finished; the dispensation of the Law was ended. There was an implicit call to the Church of Jesus to leave the Temple and all that went with it and to move into the greater, the fuller, and the abiding reality. What startling and impressive significance this gives to two other things immediately related. As we see these, we are forced to exclaim: 'Oh, wonderful!'

The first is that Paul comes right into the picture at this very point. Was Stephen God's vessel for this great heavenly revelation? Was he the spearhead of the heavenly movement? Was he the voice of Heaven, proclaiming, in a crucial and dangerous hour in the Church's history, the true and eternal nature of its constitution and vocation? Did they do him to death, driven by the sinister intelligence of the evil powers who know the incalculable importance of a Church on *HEAVENLY* ground? Very well then, Heaven answers, and in the hour of Hell's vicious and destructive onrush, brings into immediate view the man who will impart for all time the revelation in fullness of those realities inherent in Stephen's brief ministry. What an answer! What an example of the Son of Man being at the Throne! The same forces of destruction will pursue Paul for his life, but that Throne will see the revelation given in fullness, and destruction suspended until the work is done.

The second impressive thing is that the very work of evil, intended to curtail and end this essential development, was made the very means of effecting it. The Church universal, and its representation worldwide, took its rise from that very hour and event. Peter and James may remain in Jerusalem, and some die-hard legalists may circle around the latter at least; but God is moving on, and they will have either to fall in or be left in limitation.

Now all this, with its tremendously searching implications, has much to say to Christianity today.

Because of the close likeness, both of Stephen's position and of his interpretation of the times, to the Letter to the Hebrews, some have attributed that letter to him. There is no value here in pursuing the matter into the realm of authorship or textual criticism, but the identity of position in both is impossible to mistake. Indeed, 'Hebrews' could very rightly be regarded as Stephen's (or, for that matter, Paul's) full presentation of the crisis and change of dispensations.

The tragedy is that, with 'Hebrews' in their hands, responsible leaders of the Church can still adhere to a system and form which is but the extension or carry-over of the Old Testament, with certain changes of phraseology. The *IMMENSITY* of the change and gap has certainly not been apprehended. Some of the most terrible things in the whole Bible are contained in that letter in relation to the crisis and the two ways and realms. The issue is no less than that of life and death.

All this has much to say regarding the true nature of the Church and the churches. He that hath eyes to see, let him see!