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## How It Should Be And The Way To It

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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These two things are the supreme and all-inclusive concern of the New Testament. Ponder that statement carefully. The whole New Testament (Bible, if you like) is concerned with how things ought to be. This is applied to the individual Christian, the local church and the Church universal. There is a state, a condition, a position which God both desires and has provided for. Upon the degree to which this state is approximated everything that is of God depends. There is nothing willynilly, casual, mechanical, and matter-of-course with God. Throughout the Bible all that God most earnestly desires for His people is governed by an "If ye". Jesus very definitely affirmed this law "If ye", and it is implicit in every transition from potentiality to experience. What it amounts to is that a position is *essential* to inheritance. A *position* is essential to everything that God wants us to know and have.

There is one fundamental law which decides whether things are as they should be, could be, and as God's most gracious will would have them to be. If this is true, then we shall realize that some things will surely arise to neutralize that one thing. That basic reality, because of the immense and numerous issues resting upon it, will be the object of every possible kind of opposition. We ask the Lord why any one of a thousand wrong things exists to such harmful effect in Christianity, and the answer, in practically every case, can be traced to one thing. That one thing is so universal in its range and contact that it touches everything outside of heaven. We shall come to that one thing later. Here we are going to confine ourselves to its application to

### **The Local Church**

and how things ought to be in any such.

We are not going to flit over the surface in this matter, but be analytical and meticulous.

*1. A local church should be throbbing with life.*

The impression given and received should be one of livingness. The testimony should be that, although you may go jaded, weary, too tired, almost, to make the journey; disheartened and despondent; physically, mentally, and spiritually drained, you come away renewed, refreshed, reinvigorated, and lifted up. The activity of Divine life, whether by or without the teaching given, has just resulted in a spiritual uplift.

Now, note the way in which that has been said. "The activity of Divine life." We have *not* said: 'the life of human activity'. There is an illusion or delusion in much Christianity and in many churches that activity is essentially spiritual life. Hence stunts, programmes, attractions, 'special efforts', campaigns, and an endless list of 'specials' and events. All this is so often with a view to giving an impression of life, or even creating or stimulating 'life'. It may be the 'life' of works, and not the works of life. Life will work, but works are not always life. That was the indictment of the church at Ephesus in Revelation 2:2: "I know thy works...". Divine life in release will show itself, not necessarily in the bigness of numbers (although Divine life will attract) but in the genuine spiritual fruits, beginning with new births. Are the dead really raised? Does the power of life present result in conviction of sin, and a crisis of 'turning from death unto life' (or *positive* refusal to do so) without artificial apparatus? Life is spontaneous. As the Lord of the Church is the risen Lord, and His attestation is resurrection life, His presence in the local church should be attested by the power of life. So often we quote His own words when we come together, almost as a formula: "Wheresoever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I". At the same time, the atmosphere may be heavy, uninspiring, and devoid of a ministration of Divine life. Is this really consistent with His presence in the midst?

*2. A local church should be a place where, and through which, those meeting should be individually and together increasing in the measure of Christ.*

Let us hasten to say that we do not mean increasing in knowledge of doctrine, the teaching of the Bible, the things of Christianity, its work, methods, interests, and so on. It is something so common amongst Christians that, when they meet anywhere, at any time, they can use all the time in talking about their 'church', their minister or those who minister, the different branches of the work, the people, the happenings, but little or nothing about the Lord Himself and spiritual life. It is often the most difficult thing to turn the conversation into spiritual channels and feed upon what He is.

The criterion of a church's real value is the measure of Christ Himself in its members which registers itself in contacts. The testimony of a church as it should be is that it is possible for people who come into contact with its members to say: 'My word, that person (or those people) really have something of the Lord. You know it when you meet them. It is just what the Lord is to them.'

*3. The local church should be a place of living and abundant light.*

This means that it should be a real house of bread. If it is as it should be there will ever be food for spiritual satisfaction. Because of spiritual anointing the ministry will be as from an open heaven. Not studied and 'got up' addresses, but a *message* from God, and if people are hungry they should never go away unsatisfied. It should be possible for people to say: "We have been truly fed today, and strengthened for the journey."

*4. All this means that a local church is a place of warm fellowship.*

Not even just social interchange. It is a family atmosphere in which people who are disposed to fellowship find themselves 'at home'. This atmosphere is created by a deeper reality than just

'friendliness'. This deep reality is that - more than belonging to a community, a society, a 'group' - they are sharing one life, and one Lord is the living supreme concern of their very existence.

What we have said regarding these four characteristics of a local church as it should be, could be extended to other matters. We could speak of finance. In a local church as it should be, there ought *never* to be the necessity to appeal for funds. Not even that abomination, hand-to-hand collections, should exist. We say nothing of special money-raising efforts. All such things are a betrayal of a low and defective spiritual life.

By these five things alone it can be determined whether a local church is upon a right foundation.

Having said all that, it is incumbent upon us to come as quickly as possible to show what the foundation is that will produce such conditions.

You may be expecting something new, something extraordinary, something surprising. If so, you may be disappointed. Much will depend upon how seriously concerned you are, and therefore, how ready you are to brush aside prejudice, or familiarity, or superficiality, or even scepticism.

It is the old resort and recourse of the Apostles. Were things *not* as they should be in their days? Was there a condition in the church in Rome that demanded such a tremendous Letter as that written to them by Paul? Not only the great doctrinal correction, but the many practical matters.

Was there a state of things in Corinth - divisions, carnalities, disorders, rivalries, dissensions, and much more; all of which cried aloud: 'This is *not* as it should be!?' Was there an incipient movement away from grace, back to legalism, with all its loss of glory, in Galatia? Was there a 'fly in the beautiful ointment' to spoil its sweet fragrance at Philippi? Was there threatening the exalted level of spiritual knowledge at Colossae an insinuation of spurious spirituality, a false spirituality in the form of mysticism?

Yes, all this, and more, was making for a loss of real testimony, power, influence, and effectiveness in the local church of those times. But the Apostles did not condone, excuse, or accept it. Their whole attitude was: "These things ought not to be." How did they approach these situations? Had they one common basis and means of approach and attack? Yes, they had. In every case it was the same.

To Rome: Romans 6:3-10.

To Corinth: 1 Corinthians 2:2.

To Galatia: Galatians 2:20; 5:24; 6:14.

To Philippi: Philippians 2:5-8.

To Colossae: Colossians 2:11-12; 3:3.

Well, there it is; plain, clear, and positive: the Cross of Jesus Christ brought by the Holy Spirit right to the root and foundation of the life of every believer. A fundamental - foundational - crisis, and thereafter an inworking and an outworking. "We", "Ye", "I" - all the pronouns of direct application. Christians believe in the Holy Spirit. Very many desire to know the Holy Spirit as a reality and power in their lives. But it should really be understood and recognized that the Holy Spirit is committed and

wedded to the Cross. His coming awaited the work of the Cross. Only after the symbolic representation of the Cross in death, burial and resurrection with Christ by baptism did the Holy Spirit take His place in power in the lives of the first believers. Because the taproot of everything that the Cross was meant to deal with is the self-life, the self-principle, the New Testament word for which is "the Flesh", the Holy Spirit leads those under His government into the experiences which are calculated to expose and bring to the Cross the self-life of the child of God. It is a primary and inseparable part of the Holy Spirit's business to make good and real the meaning of the Cross.

This is not popular truth, but the Cross is the gateway to fullness, and the deeper the Cross the greater the measure of Divine life, power and light. This is the only way for things to be as they should be, and as God wishes them to be. Life, food, light, fellowship, and much more depend upon the degree in which the Cross is a reality in the individual and in the company. This touches the whole realm and range of Satan's power and work. Power, authority, over him is inseparable from the Cross. Therefore he will do everything to undercut, to set aside, to belittle, and discredit the Cross. The Person of Christ and the Cross of Christ have been the two grounds of the most bitter controversy in the history of Christianity. Of course, they are really one thing. It is the Person Who gives the Cross its real meaning, and it is the Cross that vindicates the Person, provided that by the Cross is meant the death, burial, and resurrection.

What we have said about the Cross and fullness in its several aspects - that is, abundance of life, food, light, fellowship, finance and victory over Satan - is not just theory or idealism. We have written history and experience in our own time. We have seen this in reality, and have also closely studied the course of things in many Christian communities.

This calls for a further very important word of reminder. It has to do with what we may call the 'spread-over' of the Cross. The Scriptures cited earlier, and many others, make it quite clear that the Cross of Christ is something that has to become very real in the *experience*, and not only in the doctrine, of the Christian. But who could survive the Cross in what it meant in the case of Jesus Christ? It rent, devastated, and desolated Him, soul and body, heart and mind. For Him it was a going out into outer darkness and forsakenness. All the eternal agony was concentrated in a few hours and a last terrible moment. There is no other creature in God's universe who could go through that and survive. Thank God, no other creature is ever required to go all that way. He went it for us. And yet, that does not mean that the whole teaching concerning our being "united with him in the likeness of his death" (Romans 6:5) is a contradiction. Nor does it mean that the Cross is only an objective historical doctrinal matter. Paul spoke of "always bearing about in the body the putting to death of Jesus" (2 Corinthians 4:10). This working of His death in the history of a believer, and in a local church (if it is on a right foundation) will be progressive and periodic. The law of nature is more life, more fruit, more growth, by recurrent winter, alternating experiences of death and life, and every cycle unto increase. This is the law of the Cross. God is not a God who believes in theories; He is immensely practical. The theory of the Cross is universally held. We sing about it.

"`Tis the way of the Cross",

and

"`Tis the way the Master went;  
Should not the servant tread it still?"

But the meaning of the Cross is to displace one entire kind, in order to make room for Another - capital A.

One of the greatest enemies to things being as they should - and could - be is our superficiality. This is an age of 'quick returns', easy gains, least trouble, everything with as little effort and cost as possible. Depth is a lost dimension. Stamina is a minus quality. Who today would take the pains to read such classics on the Cross as Dr. Mabie's *The Divine Reason of the Cross* and *The Meaning and Message of the Cross*? This superficiality is costing the Church and Christians very dearly, and so there is artificial life, artificial food, artificial fellowship which will not go through in the time of testing.

There is such a depth, power, fullness, in the Cross of Christ as to spread over all time and all eternity. So saw the Apostle when, at the end of the fullest life, he still cried: "That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings; being made conformable unto his death" (Philippians 3:10).