

'A Candlestick All of Gold' the Church as the Vessel of the Testimony

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Church must be born of the Holy Ghost, tested and perfected in the will of God, and be a contradiction to the world and the works of Satan in order to be a vessel of the testimony of Jesus.

Scripture: Luke 13:32, John 8:50, Acts 11:20, Hebrews 2:10, Hebrews 5:8

Topics: "The Church as God's Vessel", "The Importance of Testimony"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the Church as the chosen vessel for God's testimony, paralleling its role with that of Christ, who embodies the fullness of God. He explains that the Church must be born of the Holy Spirit, undergo testing for perfection, and ultimately serve as a contradiction to worldly values and the works of Satan. The sermon highlights the importance of prioritizing testimony over work, asserting that true service to God stems from a genuine expression of Christ within the Church. Sparks calls for believers to recognize their role in reflecting God's glory and to be vessels that draw attention to Him rather than themselves.

Transcript

In our previous meditation, we were occupied with the ultimate meaning and nature of that testimony which in God's thought is primary, and fundamental, but, so far as the Church is concerned, is that toward which the Lord is working - namely, the fulness of Christ.

Now we take the next thing in relation to that matter which, of course, has been in view all the time and has been referred to; but we desired first of all to have Christ Himself in contemplation as overshadowing all. Now, having that established and recognised, we are brought to the vessel which God has chosen, in which the testimony of the Lord Jesus is to be deposited and embodied - the Church as the Lord's vessel of testimony here in this dispensation. Of course, this follows the same lines as the fulness of Christ. You remember that in speaking of the fulness of Christ we saw how He was and is all of God. The Divine fulness and spiritual fulness is gathered into Him as all of God. Then as to His place (like the place of the candlestick in the holy place, between heaven and earth) there was that about Him which did meet on the one hand every kind of need of every race, of every station and level of life, from the poorest to the most distinguished amongst men; all nations, all degrees, every aspect of this world's life as represented by mankind, found in Him the full answer to its need. On the other hand, heaven found its satisfaction in Him;

God found His full-hearted satisfaction in the Lord Jesus. The universality of His fulness for heaven and for earth was the matter in view.

Now the Church follows the same line as the Lord Jesus. The vessel of the testimony proceeds along the same course as He did. He said to His disciples, the nucleus of His Church, "Follow me." But they came to realise that that meant something more than walking about where He went on the earth. It was something very deep. "Follow me." Oh, what a content! And the Church's spiritual history as the vessel of His testimony is, in that deeper and fuller sense, a following of Christ. It follows Him in the spiritual significance of every step and stage of His life when He was here.

Born of the Holy Ghost

First of all, He was born, and He was born of the Holy Ghost, and any vessel for the testimony of Jesus in the sense in which we are speaking of it, in the sense in which God has embodied it in this symbolism - a candlestick of gold - any such vessel or instrument has got to be born, and born of God the Holy Ghost. It is not something you can make and put together, it is not something that can be organised and arranged, it is not something people can decide to have - 'We will form something, we will set up something, for the Lord's service' - it is not like that at all. It has to be born, and born as He was born - of the Holy Ghost. It has to come right out from God. If you make the birth of the Lord Jesus common with all other births and take out of it the absolutely supernatural and miraculous element, then you destroy the whole concept of God as to a heavenly testimony. If you make something yourself after the likeness of this, there is no guarantee that there will be the heavenly flame in it. This has got to be born. You cannot repeat it. That, of course, carries a lot with it. Let us take that as containing much more than we are able to say and explain at this time. For all work of God let it be remembered that you cannot duplicate and multiply the original. The original is of God, not of man, and everything that is of God has to be born like that; not of man, not of the will of the flesh, but of God. It is only the first step, but it is a very radical one. Do not go away and say, 'We are going to have something like this where we are.' Do not get the idea that you can repeat anywhere anything that you think is good. If God does not do it, it will break your heart if you try to do it.

Testing Unto Perfecting

Then, having been born, it must be placed upon a plane of testing, just as He was - a testing unto perfecting. That does not allow any place for sin in the case of the Lord Jesus. The fact that the Scripture distinctly says that He was made perfect through sufferings (Heb. 2:10) and that "though he was a Son, yet learned (he) obedience by the things which he suffered" (Heb. 5:8) - that does not admit of any sin in His nature. It only signifies that He was placed upon the level of humanity, and in a representative way went through what we have to go through. He was without sin, we with sin within. The principle is the thing that governs. It is the testing as to the direction of the will. "Thy will, not mine." By every means conceivable - and conceivable by the most diabolical ingenuity of hell, all the art and cunning of the serpent deeper than man's wisdom - He was assailed in the realm of the will, as to whether He would or could be diverted one hairsbreadth from the will of His Father. By attraction, by allurements, by bribery, by prizes offered, by sore trouble, by terrible assaults, by treachery - oh, everything was used to tempt Him! But His will remained steadfast to the Father. On that ground He was tested, and we are tested in exactly the same way. The Church has to follow that course of testing unto perfecting. The perfecting in His case was simply that He brought that steadfastness to completion, that faithfulness to a final end without deviation or loss.

Now, by the grace of God, by the strength of the Spirit of God within, God is calling upon us to recognise that there is no contradiction with Him, no contradiction in this realm. He has deposited with mankind the most sacred trust, freedom of will - freedom to make choice, to make decision. That is a sacred gift of God upon which He counts very much, and for the exercise of which He always calls; and destiny depends upon the exercise of that trust in decision, choice. God focuses upon that which is His most sacred trust, making man a morally responsible person. The contradiction would be if, now that we belong to the Lord, we sat down and waited for the Lord to make our decisions for us, to do something which would decide the whole matter where we are concerned without our having anything to say about it. That would be a contradiction; God would be contradicting Himself - counting upon our will, and yet acting independently of it. I am not saying that there are not times and issues where God just steps in and acts, but that is not the normal. The normal is that God is seeking to have our will cooperating with His. On that basis, by every test imaginable, the Lord Jesus was perfected. On that line, you and I are following the Lord Jesus; on that line the Church has to go, willing one will with God. Sometimes that means a great deal of repudiation of our own will, sometimes a tremendous act of decision which usually is focused in a crisis as to what we call the will of God. That is not passive, it is active.

We are placed, then, on a basis of testing. The vessel has to be perfected in that way. Oh, there is no royal road to this true service of God, no easy way of just handing it all up to the Lord for Him to do it all, so that you need not worry or have anything to say or do in the matter. That would be very easy, but it is not the Lord's way. Beware of that snare.

The Attesting of God

Through the testing, there comes the attesting. I believe that the baptism of the Lord Jesus represented the utterness of His abandonment to God. It was a foreshadowing of the burial and resurrection - immediately followed by the allestation of God "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." It foreshadowed, it summed up, the whole of His life from the moment of His consecration to the moment of His death, and therefore the attesting of God from heaven was on the ground that He had proved Himself unto death abandoned to the will of God and entirely dead as to His own will, that is, as to another will, an independent will, apart from God. The point is that God drew attention to what was wholly of Himself. God never draws attention to man as such, nor to our works as such, even though they be for Him. God draws attention to what is wholly of Himself, and He could draw attention to His Son all the way along, and say, 'Look, behold, see!' And such an instrument as will have the testimony of Jesus in it, whether it be individual or corporate, will be like that - that God is seeking all the time so to work in that vessel that He can say, 'That is where I am, that is what I am after. Look here, look there, and you will find Me.' it is not glorifying the thing, the people, or anything on that level, but it is drawing attention to what is of Himself. If the Lord is going to add to the Church, you may be quite sure He is not going to build up something that is not of Himself, in which He is not very fully present. It was when the Church was full of the Holy Ghost and Christ was regnant in the midst that the Lord added to the Church. It is the secret of growth, it is the secret of revival, that God has something that has within it His Son in such measure that He can say, 'I can go on with that, I can attest that, I can add to that, I can build that up.' Attested through testing; approved.

And the Lord Jesus is said to have been "perfected the third day" (Luke 13:32), perfected through suffering, and, being perfected, He was received up into glory. Nothing, that is not perfected has ever been received up into glory. Do not think of glory as being only a place. It may be a place, but it is a state also; a state of glory. It is being glorified. Jesus, having been tested and attested, was glorified; and the Church, the vessel of His testimony, along the same line, following Him, can be glorified because

perfected, and perfection means simply that everything that is not of the Lord has gone out and everything that is present is of the Lord. It is the Lord Who is glorified in His saints. It is His glory, not ours.

A Contradiction to the World

That is very simple, but you see that is the nature of things. This vessel, this instrument, this candlestick, has got to stand as a full-orbed contradiction to all that exists which is not of God, that is contrary to God; that means a full-orbed contradiction to the world. What do we mean by the world? I think we can sum up the world as it is referred to in the Scriptures in two words - gain and self-glory: that is, glory which is not the glory of God. Is it not true that the spirit of this world is gain? How can you explain or interpret things in this world otherwise than that - gain? To have - whether it is territory, riches, knowledge, or whatever it may be - in every connection the goal is to have, to possess, to gain advantage, and thus by gaining to come to glory of its own. It is very subtle, it works in us all. We may think of the world, but it is here in our hearts - to have some gratification by coming to a position, to be self-satisfied by attaining to some eminence, some influence, some place of power, some possession. That is the spirit of this world, and that now is utterly contrary to God. Christ was a contradiction to all that spirit, and His Church, this candlestick vessel of testimony, is to be the embodiment of that contradiction - contrary to the world spirit and principle; not to get but to give; not to be glorified in itself but for Him to be glorified in all. The Lord Jesus sought not His own glory but the glory of Him that sent Him. He said "I seek not mine own glory" (John 8:50), and, by the context, it was a reflection upon those around Him - even the religious leaders - who sought glory by possession, position and so on. No, this is an instrument which contradicts that whole thing in spirit and in principle.

A Contradiction to the Works of Satan

It contradicts all the works of Satan. Can we sum up the works of Satan in one word? I think we can. It is selfhood. You trace the history of Satan in the Scriptures. You go right back and you find that he became the adversary of God by seeking selfhood. He made Adam the tragedy that he became by imbuing him with the same spirit of selfhood. "Ye shall be..." (Gen. 3:5). Selfhood, self-centredness; it is born in us. You can see it in the youngest child - how a child likes to be the centre of all attention. This spirit is there and it is in us all. There can be no true testimony of Jesus where things are centred in any man or body of men, or in any thing as such. Oh, how Satan has spoiled what would otherwise have been a thing very precious to God, by putting some individual as the focal centre of everything and causing everything to circle round that individual; or by making much of the thing, the instrument itself (whatever it might be), drawing attention to it in order to divert attention subtly and cleverly from the Lord. People so easily become taken up with the thing, the work, an instrument.

Selfhood has many subtle ways of expressing itself in the work of God; and surely the tragedy of much work for God has been that the people have sported themselves in the work, have gained or sought for themselves reputation, name, place, recognition and title. All that has come in imperceptibly, the Lord Jesus being hidden behind men and things. No, this vessel must be all of God, and this testimony must be, in its very essence, a contradiction to all that work of Satan.

Again in the matter of divisions. Is it not one of the great works of Satan to produce divisions, schism, conflicts, parties, factions? Oh, what a long and terrible history of Satan's work there has been dividing the people of God, stopping at nothing until he has made them individual fragments; not even allowing two to remain together in spiritual fellowship if he can help it! The battle for spiritual oneness is a real battle

against Satan and all his spiritual forces. But this candlestick is a whole. It is not a composite thing. It was not made of pieces stuck together, mortised in to the main stem. It was to be one piece, all beaten out of one piece. There are no joins here, no places of which you can say - 'that is where one begins and another ends; if you are going to divide it, that is where you must start the work.' You cannot find a crevice, crack or join in this. It is all one piece wrought by fire, wrought by the hammer. It is a contradiction to all the work of Satan in division. Let us recognise that - that division is the work of Satan. The testimony of Jesus contradicts division. It is the oneness of the great Divine love. Is it not there that all independence is such a pernicious and dangerous and damaging thing - our independent decisions and courses and life?

It may be that it is in that very connection that we have light thrown upon the Lord Jesus in His choice of friends. "I have called you friends" (John 15:15). "I chose you" (John 15:16). "He appointed twelve, that they might be with him" (Mark 3:14). "...having loved his own that were in the world, he loved them unto the end" (John 13:1). It would have been, in many respects, a very much easier thing if He had been without them and gone on alone. Knowing all that was involved in choosing those men, why did He deliberately do it? He spent a night in prayer before doing it, evidently not only for guidance, but I should say for grace. Why? Because He had to undo the works of the devil in all that disintegrating power in human life. He could have thrown over one or the other of His disciples any day; He might have washed His hands of them; but he loved them unto the end. When at last, as a result of all His patience, forbearance and love, you have those men intact - with the exception of the one who was never really an integral part of the whole from the beginning - and He is able to say, "I kept them in thy name... and not one of them perished, but the son of perdition" (John 17:12), the devil's work has been undone. There is something deeper in that than that the Lord has managed to maintain a kind of fraternity to the end. Something very deep has been done. That is the testimony of Jesus. It is a contradiction to the divisive work of Satan, and God is wanting an instrument, a vessel, like that - a candlestick to maintain that testimony; and that is very searching.

The Testimony Before the Work

Is it not true - sad though it be - that very often the work of the Lord is hindered or spoiled by the workers themselves? It is a terrible thing to say, but it is true. The problems often relate not so much to the work but to the workers. They cannot get on together, they cannot live with one another, they must be moved from one part of the field to the other because of incompatibility. Why is it? You say, of course, that it is because the work of the Cross has not been done in them. Quite true; but may it not be equally true that it is because the work has been put before testimony, or in the place of the testimony - that they have gone out for the work, not for the testimony? Suppose they were to stop - and confer and pray together, and say, 'Look here, this is no testimony, this is a contradiction of the testimony of Jesus. What are we here for? Have we come all this way and made all this sacrifice merely to do some work, and yet to have no testimony to the Lord? By our being here doing all this (or trying to do all this) we are a direct contradiction to the Lord Himself.' I think they would either pack up and come home, or they would resolve the whole thing and say, 'The testimony comes before the work, for the work must come out of the testimony: it must not be something apart. We must find a ground for going on together in a way that glorifies God.' What are we as Christians on the earth for? Are we here to do a work, or for a testimony? Yes, so many people are concerned about the Lord's work, and (in their phraseology) concerned about the Lord's testimony, but they are most difficult people to get on with. You are constantly coming up against such cases, and you have to say, 'Well, they are very concerned about the work of God, but I don't know about the testimony where they are concerned.'

Now let us face that quite frankly. We are tremendously concerned about the Lord's testimony. The testimony of Jesus is utter selflessness, the contradiction of self-centredness, of every form of selfishness, of selfhood. That is the testimony of Jesus - not work done and doctrine taught, but Christ here expressed in that way. But are we quarrelsome at home? Is it difficult for others in the home, in the family, to get on with us? Are we always making difficulty and strain and conflict? That is the devil's work, and that is no testimony. Christians are here on this earth for a testimony, and that testimony must be shown in our ability to get on with others. The only people who could not get on with the Lord Jesus were the people who were self-centred - religious or otherwise. Everybody else found Him wonderfully easy to get on with. Oh, do not let us make of this word 'testimony' anything other than this - the Lord Himself found in us; not things of truth that we want other people to have, but the Lord Himself primarily.

The Lord should therefore know when He has what He wants and is able to put His hand upon it and place it where He wants it to be. Christianity has become another system of things. You get an idea that you are called to the Lord's work, and then you say, 'Now I must be prepared for the Lord's work,' and you go for a course of training to an institute. Then when you have finished, you say, 'Now, I am prepared.' What do you mean by being prepared? Do you mean intellectually, theologically?

Well, I do not know how far that is going to carry you. The Lord only knows when you are prepared. It might be a very good thing if after that you went back to business and waited for the Lord to confirm your call by saying to you, 'Yes, I have got what I want where you are concerned, and now I will show you where I want you.' You can trust the Lord. If He has called you to His service, you can be quite sure that sooner or later He will confirm that call, even if you have to go back to business for a time.

These disciples were called, and then they went back to their fishing, and the Lord came and confirmed their call. Saul of Tarsus was called on the Damascus road, and he went and waited in Antioch until the Lord came and confirmed his call and said, 'Now you are ready, now I have what I want, now the time has come.' Are you afraid of that? Do you trust the Lord about that? After all, it is the testimony the Lord wants, and it may be that that testimony is going to be produced in those realms and spheres which you would not choose.

You think that it will be very much more straightforward and easy for you to bear the testimony if you are out in full-time spiritual work. You are deceived if you think that. Listen to one who is not a novice and not a juvenile now. I can tell you that with all the demands of spiritual work, with all the opportunities and demands for spiritual ministry with which one cannot cope, the most difficult thing in all the world is to keep the testimony abreast of the demand; and we have to confess that there so often we fail.

What we are calling the testimony is not our ministry, our teaching, our work, the articles we write, the addresses we give; that is not the testimony. That goes for nothing if there is not something behind it that is approved of God. God would take infinite pains to keep us abreast of our ministry in testimony. He would cut right across the path of Moses, even after He had called him, and seek to slay him. The Lord had commissioned him, and yet it says "it came to pass on the way... that the Lord met him, and sought to kill him" (Ex. 4:24).

Something was lacking in the background. You know what it was; it had to be attended to. It is what is behind that is the testimony, and the Lord knows when He has got that, and He can be trusted to use us when and where we are ready to be used. We have got to be the thing that the Lord needs to have reproduced in other places, and it is the work of the Holy Spirit to know where the need is and where the

provision is, and to bring the two together. There was evidently a need to be met at Antioch when Barnabas went there (Acts 11:20-26) and he, being full of the Holy Ghost, said, 'I know the man through whom this need can be met,' and he went off to Tarsus to fetch Saul to Antioch.

The Lord knows if you are there in that home with all its monotony and drudgery and lack of incentive and interest; in that business with its round of duties which are not inspiring; in that setting of deep trial. You are there to be approved under testing, and when the Lord sees you are approved, He will say, 'Come, you are the one I want; there is something else for you; come up higher.' Let it be like that with your service.

That all focuses upon this, that the Lord is more for a testimony than for a work. If we put the work in place of the testimony, we shall have confusion. We are on this earth for a testimony, and that is why, even with the greatest and most useful of His servants, the Lord never allows the work to set aside fresh discipline, fresh suffering. It looks like a contradiction. The work appears to need the man; the man is not able to do it because he is going through such trial and suffering. What a contradiction! But the Lord is more concerned to have spiritual measure in the vessel than He is to have a lot of work done.

The Lord help us by this, and give us grace to accept it. I know it is not easy; but do see that the Lord is after a candlestick all of gold, to bear a testimony; not to be an ornament, a show piece, something which attracts attention to itself, but a testimony to the Lord Himself.

Source:

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