

'As It Was in the beginning...'

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the need to return to the foundational spiritual principles of early Christianity, particularly the active role of the Holy Spirit in believers' lives.

Scripture: Hebrews 6:1

Topics: "Role of the Holy Spirit", "Return to Foundations"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the need for Christians to return to the foundational truths of their faith, arguing that the essence of Christianity has been lost over time. He asserts that the focus should shift from mere doctrines and practices to the elemental spiritual principles that defined the early church. Sparks highlights the critical role of the Holy Spirit as an active presence in believers' lives, which is essential for understanding and living out the Christian faith. He warns against superficial interpretations of progress that neglect the importance of repentance and returning to the original works of faith. Ultimately, he calls for a deep examination of the roots of Christianity to recover its original impact and authority.

Transcript

There are probably few fragments of liturgy more subject to repetition than that from which the above first part is taken. At the same time, it may be an example of the ignorance and meaninglessness with which many phrases are constantly used in Christianity.

What is the IT that was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be? The only true answer would be in changing the "it" to a "He" -- "As He was -- so is He now, and ever shall be".

For the rest, there are few, if any, things that can carry this declaration. It is just this change from the beginning that is causing an immensity of concern and consideration in Christendom, and especially in evangelical Christianity. The beginning is the basis of a very great amount of review, reconsideration, recall, and effort to recover. For, as to Christianity, it is just not true that "as it was in the beginning, it is now". True, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yea and for ever", and the foundation truths of Christianity are the same but for the more part Christendom is very much astray from "as it was in the beginning".

This is not a new digression. The declension and departure began before the apostles themselves had finished their course, and their later writings are marked by correctives, recalls and reforms.

This had to do, not only with the character, words, and ethical standards, but primarily with the spiritual principles upon which Christianity AT FIRST rested and by which it was initially constituted. It is therefore the fact that the very spiritual constitution, the very essence and nature of the "beginning" has changed, or been lost, which accounts for the deplored change, and -- what is no less than tragic -- loss of impact, authority and accountability.

It is to some of the elements of the beginning that we shall draw attention here. When we say "elements", let it be understood that we are not meaning the "elementary" in the sense of being just the simple rudimentary rules of Christianity. Rather do we use the word in the sense of "elemental", which carries with it what the dictionary calls "like the powers of nature, great, tremendous, uncompounded, essential".

Not only is it the first FEATURES, but the elemental, inherent, concentrated essence and vital potency of spiritual principles behind the outward expression. To this we shall seek to give attention, for we are convinced, after long and wide contact with Christians and Christian affairs, that it is here that the real key to the situation lies.

The mistake in most efforts to recover the original impact, dynamic, and authority of the first half-century of Christianity is in the point at which attention is applied. Such things as doctrine, form, procedure and work are the points of attention or debate. While these things MAY be seriously open to question in various respects, to start with them is to start at the wrong end, and to do that is either to add to the confusion or to come to deadlock. The best that might accrue would be compromise, and compromise is ALWAYS failure to face and deal with root causes honestly and courageously. We live in an age of compromise in every realm, and we are in an age of "confusion worse confounded". We Christians know that the world situation will never be right and straight until He comes whose right it is to reign, but He will have no compromise, no middle course. He will go to the root of things and deal with them THERE!

For ANY measure of recovery of lost power we have to get behind results and effects, whether it be in doctrine, procedure, form or work and get our finger upon causes. There was a reason and cause for the world-upturning or overturning impact of Christianity "in the beginning", and, as we have said, this lay with the eternal, heavenly, and spiritual principles or "laws" which lay within and behind what happened. It did not lie with a fully-fledged doctrinal knowledge. That was still in process of being made known.

When God is in the way of initiating or forming, He acts first and explains afterwards. The explanation is the "teaching" or "doctrine". This is the safe way. The teaching is the explanation of experience. It is only the reverse order when the teaching has been given and forsaken. Then, as in the case of the prophets, God says what He is doing or going to do, and acts accordingly. Initially, just enough light is given for God to act upon. This method and principle of God can be seen in both the Old and New Testament. It is always of value to have God giving light on what He has DONE, so that we come into UNDERSTANDING of His ways, rather than have a lot of teaching without experience. We should put ourselves in the way of God's dealings and acts, if this was so.

The original impact did not lie within a fixed and established form of procedure. It certainly did not rest upon organization and institutions. These hardly existed, if at all. We repeat that it is folly to start toward hoped-for recovery of power by dealing with such things as the effects rather than the causes.

Let us then excavate through the accretions of Christian tradition and history, down to the bedrock principles.

The writer, over a period of nearly forty years of personal contact with evangelical Christianity in many parts of the world, has been terribly impressed with one basic weakness or defect. This defect undoubtedly is indicative of a whole set of deflexions from what was the conception in the beginning. While the DOCTRINE of the Holy Spirit is well known, and a great deal of teaching on that doctrine has been received, both from expositors personally, and through an immense amount of literature on the subject, there is a great deal to make real the question as to whether or not, after all, multitudes -- even the majority -- of Christians know anything about the Holy Spirit as a positive, active, indwelling presence. This question is supported by conduct, conditions, and ignorance which glaringly deny the teaching of the New Testament.

Jesus said of the Holy Spirit that "He shall be IN you", "He shall guide you (as within you) into all the truth", "He shall take of mine and show it unto you", and so on. John, by the Spirit, said (to all true Christians, not to special ones, or leaders or teachers): "The anointing which ye received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that any one teach you; but... his anointing teacheth you concerning all things..." (1 John 2:27). While this related to a specific matter, i.e. Antichrist, the principle, according to Jesus, -- is of wider application, and is just that the Holy Spirit is an arbiter WITHIN making believers aware of what is of God and what is not. It is something that is not for an advanced point in spiritual life, but relates to the very beginning: "The Spirit himself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are children of God" (Rom. 8:16). The law of the Spirit of life is of constant growing reality and application as the very law of spiritual progress. It is no less a matter than that great factor of spiritual understanding and intelligence with which the New Testament is so largely occupied.

Let us say at once that this principle does not make the Christian independent of instruction through anointed teachers, neither does it by any means create an above-the-Scriptures position. The Holy Spirit will always work according to the Word of God, and NEVER on any account make us superior thereto or independent thereof. Nothing but the utmost peril of deception could come from such an interpretation or "enlightenment" or "leading" (?) that makes for such independence or superiority. Nevertheless, the INWARD government, enlightenment, and witness of the Holy Spirit is a primary factor in that which "was at the beginning". Indeed, it goes to the very root of the very nature of the New Testament Christian life; the essential BEING of a true child of God. This both determines and defines what we may call the new and distinctive "species" which Christians are intended to be.

When the apostle Paul uses the phrase: "he that is spiritual" (1 Cor. 2:15), he is describing the very difference of two distinct categories of people. Not only is he dividing them but he is describing them. One category, he says, is deficient and defective in certain faculties, endowments and qualifications, relating to knowledge, discernment, judgment and understanding. The other category is distinguished by this very ability and qualification. But it is not an endowment given subsequent to new birth. Rather is it inherent in new birth, and a constituent of the new life. It is "he that IS spiritual"; he that is a certain kind of being. This being is said to have been born of the Spirit as differing from born of the flesh, begotten of God, as differing from by the will of man. This difference is the result of an advent. It is the advent of the Holy Spirit INTO the spirit of the committed believer. Surely, it stands to reason that the indwelling presence of such a one as "the Spirit of the living God", God the Holy Spirit, is meant to be more than a passive, inactive, unenlightening, unendowing power and intelligence.

It is a very gratifying thing to see people changing and adjusting their lives, their conduct, their manner of speech and dress, their habits, their attitudes, etc., not because the law has been laid down to them by others -- be he preacher or some other person -- but because the Holy Spirit within has spoken and made

His mind known to them concerning such matters. There are numerous matters in the Scriptures concerning which there are most flagrant contradictions in so many Christians that we might well ask the question, "Where is the Holy Spirit in them?"

This is the BASIS of everything "as it was in the beginning". This is what came in with the advent of the Holy Spirit. This is what was intended and taught to be the very nature of the new dispensation.

Not that it was universally and perfectly lived up to, even in those times but it was truly there, accounting for very big and drastic changes in lives, even in the apostles themselves. This, more than the outward happening, was the true nature and power of "The Acts of the Holy Spirit"; which is a truer title to the book called "The Acts of the apostles".

This bedrock principle worked out in every connection and direction, as to Christ Himself, the church, procedure, function, work, and so on. And it is our purpose to show this, as we are enabled by the same Spirit, for we are convinced that this is "as it was in the beginning".

Sometimes we hear people say, "Oh, don't look back to the past and to what has been. Look on to God's new thing"; and they quote Paul in saying, "Leaving the things which are behind". This is very superficial talk, to say the least of it. It can be very dangerous and misleading. Provided that there has been no departure, no forsaking, no loss, no relinquishing of anything that was of God, and that the foundation "principles" still obtain WITH WHAT THEY MEAN, there is room for the exhortation: "Let us go on to full growth, not laying again the foundation..." (Heb. 6:1-6). But the New Testament, the risen Lord, the Spirit, have strong things to say regarding "repenting and doing the FIRST works" (Rev. 2:5), and the Lord has to sadly remind of a position from which His people have departed, and call them back to their beginnings.

There WAS that which -- grievously -- is NOT now.

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