

The Reinforcement of Spirituality

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of spiritual reinforcement in times of crisis, drawing on the example of the Tabernacle and the letters to Timothy to illustrate the need for spiritual strength, uprightness, and assurance of salvation.

Scripture: Isaiah 40:31, Ezekiel 47:1-12, Romans 8:1-4, 1 Corinthians 15:44-45, Ephesians 6:12, Philippians 4:13, 1 Timothy 6:12, 2 Timothy 2:3, 2 Timothy 3:17, 2 Timothy 4:6

Topics: "Spiritual Reinforcement", "Turning Points in Faith"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the critical turning points in the spiritual life of God's people, both individually and corporately, highlighting the importance of God's provision during these crises. He draws parallels from the construction of the Tabernacle, where corner boards serve as reinforcements at delicate turning points, symbolizing the need for spiritual reinforcement in times of crisis. The letters of Paul to Timothy are presented as a response to a significant turning point in the Church's history, underscoring the necessity of recovering and reinforcing spirituality to navigate challenges. Sparks asserts that true Christianity is fundamentally spiritual, and all growth must be rooted in this spiritual reality. Ultimately, he calls for believers to recognize and strengthen their spiritual lives to safeguard against decline and ensure a robust testimony for the future.

Transcript

In the life of the people of God, whether individually or corporately, there constantly occur times of crisis, or turning-points. The Old Testament describes many such times of particular and peculiar peril in the life of the Lord's people, and shows how God has moved to meet the situation at such times. This has been true also in the history of the Church, again and again, ever since New Testament times; and it is true in the life of any local company of the Lord's people. When, for some reason, conditions are critical, and a turning-point has been reached, at such a time it is very important to know how the Lord would meet the situation and the need.

The Corner Boards of the Tabernacle

May I remind you of a provision which the Lord made in the construction of the Tabernacle in the wilderness? The Lord gave instructions that, in the erection of the boards of the Tabernacle, at the corners there should be an extra board, reinforcing the turning-points. Of course, corners are always delicate things, perilous things; turning-points are always fraught with great possibilities. You come up to a point

where a turn is going to be made, a new course is going to be followed, and that turning-point needs to be negotiated with much wisdom and care. Something extra must come in there to cover it. And in that infinite wisdom of God - the recognition not only of the weakness of a corner in natural things, but of the perils connected with turning-points in spiritual life - the Lord made and makes a provision; He covers it, prescribes for it. As in the boards of the Tabernacle, there must be some real reinforcement at that delicate and dangerous point of crisis.

Let us just dwell for a moment or two upon the Tabernacle; we shall come back to it again presently. You know that it was, in type, the shrine of God's testimony. It is called the "Tabernacle of testimony", or "The Testimony". In type it was what Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, calls "the mystery of Christ" - the shrine of the mystery of Christ into which no natural eyes may peer. And in this shrine of the testimony of God concerning His Son, Jesus Christ, there are these turning-points; and because this testimony is involved, they are, as we have said, always precarious places and times. If something goes wrong here, if something goes wrong at this juncture, it is going to have very serious effects in the future. The next phase of things is going to be affected by what happens as we turn this corner, by just how far we negotiate this present difficult situation - whether in our lives, or in the work of God, or in the history of the Lord's people, locally or generally. The future is involved.

We have come up to this point: here are the boards all leading up to it, and from this point onwards a new course has to be taken; but oh, this new course has got to be very, very carefully safeguarded. All that has been in the past, all the labour, the work, the suffering and the cost, may be hazarded at a point of crisis by any weakness or lack of care, when we come to this issue. All the future may be made unsafe, weak, clouded by regrets, if this turning-point is unguarded.

Paul's Letters to Timothy: A Critical Point

Now it is with such a turning-point in the Church's history, and with the Lord's way of handling it, that we are confronted when we take up Paul's two letters to Timothy. We find ourselves at one of the major turning-points in the history of the Church - a turning-point fraught with momentous issues; and those issues have thrown their shadows right down the centuries to the present day. We need to know what was God's provision - which remains as His provision - to meet that which came in at the turn of the road then. For the values that we have given us here in these two letters - and you will never call them 'little' letters again, if ever you have - were meant to cover this whole age, because the Holy Spirit, who gave these letters through Paul, foresaw the far-reaching effects of what was happening. And what is of general and comprehensive importance here has its own application to all those minor crises that occur in our own personal lives, or in our life together as God's people.

Such a crisis, then, was the occasion of Paul writing these two letters to Timothy. And may I say again, for I do want to make clear this very, very important thing: this is an inclusive and comprehensive example of all crises in the spiritual life, an example in principle and in nature: that is, it has all the features of any spiritual crisis, and it therefore contains all God's method and means of meeting any spiritual crisis. We are not just dealing with Church history - we are dealing with our own history. We need to be met at that very point in our own spiritual lives.

Inclusively, then, the Divine method of meeting any critical situation is - what? It is the reinforcement of fundamental and essential realities. That is what these two letters contain. The reinforcement of the boards at the corner, in the re-INforcement - and ENforcement, if you like, for Paul commands here, as

well as exhorts - of fundamental and essential realities, is God's inclusive method of dealing with any threat, or any possibility, or any actual change in the course of things. And there is one all-comprehending fundamental of true Christianity, and that is spirituality - its essentially spiritual nature. So that God's method in meeting any critical situation in the Christian life is to reinforce, or to recover, spirituality.

Christianity Wholly Spiritual

For true Christianity, from its very beginning, through all its growth, to its final perfecting, is wholly spiritual. A true Christian is fundamentally and essentially, by his very being and existence, a spiritual person. All our growth in grace is not the growth of time, of years, or of the acquiring of knowledge about the things of God. True growth is just our own spiritual growth, and before God there is no other stature, no other growth. God takes infinite pains to see that our growth is spiritual growth. And the consummation and the perfecting of the life of the Christian is a wholly spiritual thing. For the consummation is a spiritual body. "If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body... that is not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural" (1 Cor. 15:44,45). Those words, as you know, apply to the resurrection body. "It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body" (vs. 44). So it needs a spiritual person to occupy a spiritual body; and if the spiritual body is the consummation of the Christian life, then the Lord would have, not a poor, little spiritual person occupying a consummate body; He would have us full-grown, so that the perfecting of the Christian life is in keeping with its consummation: it must be spiritual.

Everything else in the Christian life is spiritual. As the people are spiritual people by their very birth by the Spirit, so their work and service are spiritual. It is not a matter only of how many things we do, but of the spiritual quality of what we do. There can be tremendous spiritual value intrinsically in a 'small' thing done in the Holy Spirit, while very little may come of a vast amount of feverish activity in what is called Christian work. Everything is judged in Heaven by its spiritual value. The warfare is spiritual; you have no need to be reminded of that. "Our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but... against the spiritual hosts of wickedness..." (Eph. 6:12). Our knowledge and our understanding as Christians are spiritual. Our fellowship is spiritual - our relationship with one another is a spiritual relationship, in the unity of the Spirit.

All government amongst Christians is spiritual. It is not autocratic, it is not official - it is spiritual. Very, very few Christians today are able to discern and discriminate between human government and spiritual government in the House of God. They confuse the two, and thereby bring in many, many complications. Government in the Christian realm is spiritual government. Guidance is spiritual guidance "led by the Spirit" (Rom. 8:1-4). The methods and resources of the Church, of Christians, are spiritual methods and resources. All this makes up the comprehensive truth that the fundamental reality of the true Christian life is spirituality: that is, that it is all of the Holy Spirit.

In one of the closing chapters of the prophecies of Ezekiel (47:1-12), there is brought into view the river - the river rising in the sanctuary, broadening and deepening on its way - and on its banks trees, bearing fruit every season, and the leaf unfading. I believe that to be a foreshadowing, a pre-figuring, of what we have in the book of the Acts. The trees are men, planted by God, drawing their life from the river of God. How that river broke out in the sanctuary in the days of the 'Acts'! And how we see the men planted then by God on the banks of that river; and the fruit - how abundant was the fruit! Trees, sustained by heavenly life, carrying on a heavenly testimony: in a word, spiritual people, men and women whose life and resource and everything was the Spirit of God - for it was the Spirit of God who broke out in the sanctuary on the day of Pentecost. God's testimony down the whole course of the river requires spiritual people, drawing upon spiritual resources, and that is what we have there.

Spirituality Must Be Recovered or Reinforced

Now, all the troubles inside of Christianity - and 'Christianity' is a big term; it comprehends a very great deal; you can localise it and personalise it, if you like - all the troubles in Christianity are due to loss or lack of spirituality. God's method, ever and always, in getting over some trouble in us, whether personally or together, locally or in His Church, is always a reinforcement of the spiritual life. We never get over any trouble without some strengthening of our spiritual life. Is that not true? When we are faced with some crisis, we are not going to be able to patch it up, put it right, do something about it outwardly - we have got to come into a new spiritual position about this. We shall never get through until we have got a new spiritual position, or until our spiritual measure has been increased.

It is futile to try to get rid of any troubles in Christianity at large, or locally, or in ourselves, along any other line but God's line: recognising, 'This is a crisis - everything in the future depends upon how we get round this awkward corner, this difficult situation - all the past is going to be jeopardised if we do not negotiate this spiritual situation triumphantly.' How will it be done? By an extra board - by the reinforcement of what has been in the past against the future, holding everything intact by a strengthening of our spiritual life. So the Divine safeguard, or remedy, for every trouble is the reinforcement, or recovery, of spirituality.

Just look again at those boards of the Tabernacle. Firstly, they were made of acacia wood, which is known for its great strength and power of endurance. Secondly, they were of considerable height - ten cubits - which is higher than any man naturally: this is something of greater stature than you or I are naturally - we who comprise the House of God. Thirdly, they were upright, standing on their feet. Those three things are very significant. Here is something that needs strength that is more than ordinary strength, for endurance. Here is something that means stature that is more than ordinary human stature, to rise above. And here is something that must really be on its feet, established.

Spiritual Strength of Christianity at the Beginning

Now you have the New Testament crowded into those few things. And these letters to Timothy, from which we have momentarily digressed, are just full of those very things. How wonderful these things are seen to be in the beginnings, are they not? For, you know, even at the beginning of the Church's history, it was a tremendous corner that was being turned. The coming of Christ Himself represented the biggest crisis in all history. It was a universal turning-point; from that time onward, things were going to change. And into that tremendous crisis right at the beginning the Church was thrown; it was a delicate, dangerous, perilous time. All the succeeding generations would be coloured by how the Church behaved and got through those critical days.

Look at the strength of the human 'boards'! Was it just human strength? Think of Peter only a very little while before: how much could he take, by that fire in the courtyard, with the finger of the maid pointing at him? He just crumpled under it! But look at him - and the others - now! Are these men on their feet? are they standing upright? They are not only standing on their feet in the Lord - they are putting other people on their feet! Look at that poor fellow who has been lying there at the gate all those years, unable to use his feet (Acts 3). Peter takes him by the right hand, and up he comes - he is on his feet right enough! The same thing happens again later (Acts 14:8): they are putting people on their feet.

And out of that grew the rich ministry that we have in the New Testament about being "established". Being established just means 'standing up'. You and I will be no good to the testimony of the Lord unless we are spiritually on our feet, standing up. When we lose our feet, when we break down, when we let go, it means

that the testimony is let down. If you have lost your feet, been knocked off your feet, or if you have not been on your feet for a long time, or if you have been up and down over a long period, you will have to have a crisis over this. You have got to get round that corner. All that has been is in the balances with this present issue; all that the Lord would have in the future is made possible, or will be all wrong, unless you get round this corner quickly, and get your feet in the Lord.

You know what I mean by 'getting your feet in the Lord': it is having what Paul calls "full assurance" - "assurance" - that is, about your salvation. For these boards, as you know, were founded in two basic things - two sockets - made of silver. Now silver signifies redemption, and the double testimony under their feet emphasized or reinforced this twice over. Two is always sufficiency of testimony, is it not? - and they were in that. We need to have assurance of our salvation, certainty about this matter. Until that is so, there is no strength and there is no uprightness; there is no endurance, no stature; no measure. And that applies to many other things besides our foundation, our confidence, our faith, our certainty with the Lord. These are things which must really characterize the true Christian. These are the constituents of a spiritual man, or a spiritual Church.

A Dispensational Crisis

Now, if you have been thinking in Timothy's letters, if you know those letters at all, does it not all come back to you? Paul's Lord was making him write those letters on these very things at a time of tremendous crisis. The whole crisis in Christianity, at this turning-point in its history, was focused in this young man himself. These letters to Timothy are nothing less than dispensational in their significance. They contain far more than those favourite texts: "Take thy part in suffering hardship, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 2:3); or, "Fight the good fight of the faith" (1 Tim. 6:12); or, "That the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work" (2 Tim. 3:17); or, "A vessel unto honour... prepared unto every good work" (2 Tim. 2:21).

How we love these fragments! Yes, but do remember that every one of them is set in the background of a crisis for the dispensation, for, until you recognise that, you have not really got the value of the fragments. Why 'take your share of hardship as a good soldier of Christ Jesus'? Because the dispensation hangs upon it, Timothy! This is not only for you, but for the future. Why be "a vessel unto honour", why "lay hold on eternal life", why "fight the good fight"? There are far, far-reaching issues at stake, right on to the end of Christianity's history - that is why! These letters were not written to Timothy just for Timothy's sake, for the time being, to help this young fellow along in his own Christian life. And they were certainly not written just to give us nice fragments for our own Christian life. These letters were written at a most critical time in Christianity's history, and all their fragments relate to that.

Imminent Departure of Paul

Now take the fragments in their setting, and they acquire new meaning, new significance. You will understand why Paul is so serious - his appeals, his exhortations; his repeated "O man of God", "O man of God" (1 Tim. 6:11; 2 Tim. 3:17). Was there a crisis on? Well, there are plenty of proofs in the letters themselves of that fact. You can pick out some of the indications. First of all, be reminded that these were the last writings of the Apostle. The second letter was probably the last thing that Paul ever wrote, and he wrote it within perhaps hours of his execution. Paul is going, Paul is passing from this scene; Paul's personal ministry, in word and in writing, is coming to a close. There is going to be a real loss and a real gap, tremendous loss to the Church. It is a crisis. If God takes away any servant of His through whom He

has met His people in some rich, full way, there is always a great gap, and that gap does not become smaller as time goes on. You are always wishing that that servant of God were back to help; you are always saying, 'Now what would he say, what would he do?' I do not exaggerate the point. This letter contains this. Paul says: "I am already being offered up" (2 Tim. 4:6). Is that a crisis? Well, if it is - and it is - we need something, Paul, from the Lord to meet this situation. The Lord must reinforce us at this turn in the road.

Secession from Paul

And these letters do that! You see that, as we go on. Ah, but not only so - the letters reveal a secession from Paul. He cries: "all that are in Asia turned away from me" (1 Tim. 1:15). And, although we know that some did leave him because it was too costly to stay with him, and that the peril of his death was overshadowing any association, it is difficult, in looking into this matter, not to conclude that the turning from Paul by those in Asia was on DOCTRINAL GROUNDS. You say, 'Where have you the evidence for that?' The evidence is abundant, and will be brought forward presently. There is a secession from Paul because of his teachings, his line of things; because of the standard that he has raised, because of the level that he has insisted upon. They cannot go on with Paul, and that is a crisis. Anticipating somewhat, we may go further, and say that the outcome of that secession from Paul may be seen in the first chapters of the book of the Revelation. The condition of the very churches in Asia that Paul had been used to bring into being, beginning with Ephesus, of which Timothy was the overseer - the condition of those churches in the first chapters of the Revelation is seen to be resultant upon their turning from the man whom God had used to bring them into being. It is a very critical thing to let go something that God has done, to lower your standard. We shall come back later to consider how terribly the standard was lowered. It is most dangerous, it represents a tremendous crisis, to weaken on anything that the Lord has shown to be His will. So, they were leaving Paul.

Spiritual Decline

And then, look at the change in the nature of things indicated by these letters. They are just full of a lowering level of spiritual life, in every way, a loss of spirituality, a decline. It is a crisis. Without going into details, all I will say at this point is this: that, where God has given richly, where God has given in any fullness, where God has called to anything more than the nominal and shown His mind to be spiritual fullness, the peril is always present of losing, letting go, declining, dropping away to some lower level, perhaps because of the cost of going on, or for some other reason. This peril is always present.

Now I come back for a moment to where we started: reinforcement. The Lord is always seeking to strengthen our spirituality in order to guard against these threats and perils which are ever imminent, never far away. And is it not impressive that, when there is a time of danger, of peril, of a threat, of a crisis in the spiritual life, the Lord puts us into such a state of agony and suffering and distress that we have got to get a new position with Him altogether, or we shall not get through? How faithful He is! Because of a threat, because of a danger, He may plunge us right into a sea of difficulty and trial, in order to strengthen our swimming powers, to get us into some fuller measure, so that we shall not so easily be caught there again. When anything like that reappears, we shall recognise it for what it is, and know that we have got to keep our feet, keep our balance, keep steady.

So these letters are just full of exhortations to Timothy "Be strong", in other words 'Be steady'; "Take your share of hardship"; "Lay hold on eternal life" - all because of what Timothy signifies in the whole

dispensation.

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