

The Spiritual Resources of the Church for Its Heavenly Mission

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Church must become a spiritual people, living by Divine life, having spiritual knowledge, and being trained practically in the spiritual realm to overcome the spiritual challenge facing it today.

Scripture: Matthew 28:16

Topics: "Divine Life", "Spiritual Authority"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the urgent spiritual challenge facing the Church today, highlighting the need for believers to rely on divine authority and life rather than natural strength. He argues that the Church must recognize its impotence against the forces of darkness and embrace a spiritual existence characterized by divine life, knowledge, and influence. The sermon calls for a corporate response to spiritual challenges, asserting that individual believers must be supported by the Church community to effectively confront spiritual warfare. Sparks stresses that true spiritual effectiveness comes from a deep, experiential knowledge of God, rather than mere intellectual understanding. Ultimately, he encourages believers to view their current circumstances as a training ground for spiritual growth and preparation for their heavenly mission.

Transcript

"But the eleven disciples went into Galilee, unto the mountain where Jesus had appointed them. And when they saw him, they worshipped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came to them and spake unto them, saying, All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth. Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations" (Matt. 28:16-19).

A Spiritual Challenge to be Answered

There is a challenge in this present time which is, perhaps, more acute and serious than at any other time in the history of this world. No doubt in the early days of the Church the challenge was very strong, but then the surface of the earth invaded by the Gospel was very small compared with the range in our time, and in many other ways things were far less developed than they are now. The development of the centuries has provided so very much more of ground and means for the operation of the kingdom of darkness in relation to this world, and that challenge of the kingdom of evil is very, very serious and intense in our time. In many ways the Church of God is aware of it - perhaps not completely conscious of

the cause or the reason, but aware of the fact that she is being stifled, resisted, in a very large degree nullified; made aware of a certain impotence and ineffectiveness and of the absence of authority and power to meet a spiritual situation which is becoming so intense. I say that is a challenge of this present time which does threaten to make the Church a thing which, speaking comparatively, is not to be taken very seriously. The world can pass on and ignore her, and situations can arise here and there with which she cannot cope, before which she is impotent and helpless - and knows it.

That challenge represents a need, and, while we have not the conceit to imagine that that need can be met by us, yet it behooves us to face the challenge and consider the need, and if God will take up the weak and the small and make them to count for something far, far beyond what they would do naturally, then there may be possibilities where we are concerned, if we really seriously face this matter before God.

We have spoken of a spiritual situation, and it is not necessary, I think, to say to you that, while we are very conscious that the temporal situation is increasingly difficult for the work of God, behind all the external difficulties is a spiritual rulership. The things seen are, after all, only the foreground, the stage, of something far greater behind. "World rulers of this darkness" is no meaningless phrase. It is there that the trouble lies, and, until there is in existence that which can touch things there with the authority of Christ, the situation for the Church is hopeless. We can recite so glibly - it is the slogan of all missionary enterprise - "All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth. Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations." I think the emphasis, at any rate the deduction in practice, is mainly on "Go ye into all the world and preach the gospel," and not upon "All authority hath been given unto me in heaven and on earth." "Go ye therefore..."; the word "therefore" has not been given and is not given its real and sufficient place. It is the link between the undertaking and the "all authority" vested in the Lord Jesus. And as for the Church standing in the good and value of that "all authority" well, it does not say much for the authority if the present impact of the Church is the standard of judging it. It is that that constitutes the urgency of this present time.

The Challenge Answered in a Spiritual People

Now, having indicated again that this whole thing is a spiritual matter to be fought out in the spiritual realm, the work of God must in consequence be seen in the spiritual realm before there can be any meeting of the temporal situation and overcoming it. We are brought right here to the heart of things. We have spoken in our previous meditation of a body of Christians, of a certain kind, in a certain position, doing a certain work. What do we mean by that? Well, to use mere words is not necessarily helpful. We must explain our words. If we say a spiritual people, in spiritual relatedness, occupying a spiritual position, pre-eminently meeting spiritual forces to their overthrow, that word 'spiritual' eludes us at once. What does it amount to in practical outworking?

The Marks of a Spiritual People

(a) Living by Divine, Not Natural, Life

Well, firstly, it means that the life of such people must be spiritual life. In the work of God there can be, and often is, the projecting of a great deal of natural life-force. You may call it by different terms - zeal, enthusiasm, drive, energy, any such word to describe putting yourself into the thing with all your might to make it go. So, by this zest, by this intensity, by this strength, you get the work of God done. Now, it is not that that I am talking about. If this thing is going to be done in the spiritual realm, it is only going to be done by spiritual life, and spiritual life is something altogether different from natural life. As we are basing

everything upon the Cross, allowing the Cross to be our basis and our interpretation, it is just here that the great cleavage is made, the great difference is recognised, the great turnover takes place. At the Cross, so far as spiritual things are concerned, all natural life ends; there, all natural energy, as capable of producing any spiritual effect, is brought to an end, is at a discount. Even natural physical life, energy, strength, as producing anything spiritual in effect, counts for nothing. When you are coming into touch with spiritual forces, what is the good of muscular or constitutional strength in the physical, natural realm? Those forces have only to touch the strongest body and it will be broken. So you find in the New Testament that all counting upon the energy, the capability, the strength of the natural life, is set aside, and the men concerned are brought to an end of that and made to know that their spiritual work, their spiritual accountability, takes its rise from Divine life even for the body, so that, under the hand of God, they come to the place where, unless Divine life is administered even to their physical bodies - strong as they have been physically and constitutionally before - they cannot go on, they are at an end.

Paul is a great outstanding example of that. The others were there too. Peter came to his crisis on that. He was very sure of himself and what he could do, how far he could go, what he could go through and endure; but he had to come, by means of the Cross, in the very presence of the Cross, to the place where he recognised that he could never get through on that. The words of the Lord to him had an immediate meaning - "Thou canst not follow me now; but thou shalt follow afterwards" (John 13:36); not 'hereafter,' that is, in the distant Hereafter, in the next life, but "afterwards." After what? - after you have learned this lesson of the utter impotence of human life, and the absolute necessity and potency of Divine life, even in the physical realm.

So that one of the great lessons that this people must learn experimentally is to know how to live by Divine life; and when we get on to that basis all issues are taken out of the hands of natural eventualities. Here is Saul of Tarsus, a man with tremendous force and seemingly great powers of endurance physically, a man of very great natural life - what we should call soul-force. What did the Lord do with him? He brought him to the place where he despaired of life in order that he might not trust in himself, but in God Who raiseth the dead (2 Cor. 1:9). In so describing his experience he simply intimates - 'Well, naturally I am a dead man, the sentence of death is passed upon me.' But here is this man going on - a dead man going on. And we do not find him at the last saying, 'I am now going to be executed, they are now going to finish me, I have got to give in this time.' No! The issue is not with emperors or governments or persecutors. He is going to finish his course - not to have it cut short; no 'broken column' here; he is going to finish his course, keeping the faith to the last moment (2 Tim. 4:7); not having to give up because of circumstances, but, as he puts it in another place, he will offer himself up as a libation (Phil. 2:17). Is he not in exactly the same position as his Lord, Who said of His own life, "No one taketh it away from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment received I from my Father" (John 10:18). It is not with the High Priest, it is not with the Jewish nation, it is not with anybody else - it is with Him to say when He will die. They said, "Not during the feast." He said, in effect, 'Yes, during the feast; it shall be on the day of the Passover'; and it was.

Authority in Christ, then, is first of all in terms of life. If there is going to be this impact of the Divine authority upon the spiritual kingdom of evil and death, the people through whom the impact is going to be registered will have to come on to this basis where, even for their very physical life, they have to know the life of God, to know how to draw life from God and how to minister spiritual, Divine life to one another. Divine life is a tremendous thing, and if we are living by it we are not going to die because we are old. We are not going to die because nature says so, or the doctor says so! We are going to die when the Lord

says so! And when the Lord has decided that Divine life is no longer required for the carrying on of His work through us, then we shall enter into life still more abundant, and it will not be death. That is the authority of Christ in the universe where death is the master opposing power. Such a people must know this.

To be brought there is not just teaching; this is grim, desperate business. It meets with a challenge, and a challenge from no less a realm than the whole hierarchy of Satan. The answer to that challenge has to come along the line of Divine life known by us for spirit and soul and body.

The Challenge to Life Must be Met Corporately

And how corporate a matter that is! I am talking about a people. Yes, it becomes individual; there has to be an individual exercise and experience; an individual knowledge and application and appropriation; but it is something more than individual. In that battle, every individual needs the cooperation and the encompassing of the Church. Woe betide the poor individual, whoever he or she may be, who gets out into that realm of spiritual conflict without the encompassing of the saints!

So this matter of triumph in the spiritual realm is a Church matter, and when I say 'a Church matter,' I mean it is a corporate matter. The Church may be indicated and implied by two or three in the Name of the Lord, but it must be that at least to minister to one another. Oh, if the Church more largely knew about that and stood right into it, what a lot of tragedies would never take place that are taking place! What a lot of people would be spared to the work of God who are being put out! What a lot of retirements from the work would never take place! Do they represent the triumph of the enemy? Everyone who has to give up for want of Divine life - is that the triumph of the enemy? That is what I mean by spiritual people in a spiritual position meeting spiritual forces - firstly, knowing spiritual life (that is, Divine life) for spirit, the inner man: for soul, for mind: yes, and for body.

Natural Weakness Essential to Spiritual Power

Here is the great paradox of Christianity - "when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Cor. 12:10). "My power is made perfect in weakness" (v. 9). Divine life does not make of us Samsons in a literal, physical sense, so that our muscles develop, our biceps become abnormal, and all that sort of thing. Rather, in weakness there is something the withdrawal of which would mean that the frail vessel would crumple up and fade out very soon. There is something there which is not natural; it is the very life of God. Everything has to be accounted for on that basis.

Let me add a word in order to guard against misunderstanding or misapprehension. I am not saying that you are wrong to be healthy, or even to be physically strong. I am not suggesting that you go to the Lord and ask Him to take your health and strength away. But I have said that if that is the basis on which you are working, if it is upon that that you are counting for spiritual effectiveness, you are wrong; it does not count at all. You may be healthy and strong, but you need to recognise that it is not that that will see this work done, but your necessity is as great in the matter of spiritual Divine life as that of the weakest, the most helpless. There may be a place for your health and strength, but something more than that is needed to do the work in the spiritual realm.

(b) Spiritual Knowledge of the Lord by Revelation, Not Intellectual

The same thing holds good in the matter of spiritual knowledge. No amount of natural, accumulated, studied knowledge can touch spiritual things. There is a value in Bible study, there is a value in accumulating knowledge of things in relation to God's Word and God's work. Oh, do not despise that and do not let anything I say turn you aside from diligence in that; but, after all, though you have a vast amount of such knowledge: though you know your Bible throughout: though you be what is called a Bible scholar: all that, at its fullest, stops short of spiritual effectiveness. It does not matter how much of that you have: when it comes to the question of registering upon those spiritual intelligences, there is no natural knowledge that can touch them. You will never overpower the forces of darkness with natural intelligence and accumulated information, however great it is. Spiritual knowledge is of another kind. You may have the intellectual - I say, do not despise it - but you must recognise the need of something extra. Yes, I know the Bible in a way: that is, I know what is here in actual words and sentences and paragraphs; but that will get me nowhere when I come to deal with spiritual things. I have got to have something extra to that - a spiritual understanding, spiritual knowledge. Something has got to come from God by way of illumination and revelation into my own heart concerning God's thoughts in this Book. How can we explain that? It is so difficult, but there it is - perhaps you understand what I mean. Spiritual knowledge is of another order. It is only God Who knows in the way that can meet the spiritual intelligences.

So this people who count for something in that ultimate realm - that realm where there is the only true accountability - this people will have to be a people of spiritual knowledge and of spiritual understanding. Paul prayed that "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ may give unto you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him; having the eyes of your heart enlightened, that ye may know..." (Eph. 1:17-18); and it is not without significance that that prayer for spiritual revelation and knowledge precedes what he writes concerning the wiles of the devil and "Our wrestling is not against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers of this darkness" (Eph. 6:11,12). There is no training in any seminary or institution which can of itself equip you against the wiles of the devil. This requires spiritual training.

Spiritual Training Practical, Not Academic

Let me put here this parenthesis. Some of you who read this may be concerned about your life, your future, and you are wondering whether the Lord would lead you into His service. Some of you are definitely feeling that He will. The question in your mind is, how will you get your training, what about your preparation? Let me say this, that, while sound instruction in the Word of God will be a necessary foundation, do not think that that alone is your training for the work of God. That is not an adequate training, or qualification. The work of God lies in a realm where, though you may have all that, you may be at a discount altogether; you may be frustrated, broken, defeated, as many servants of God are today because they have not got the spiritual goods to meet the situation. Your really vital training will be practical, in the spiritual realm. That is, the Lord will deal with you in such a way as to develop you as spiritual men and women who know spiritual life and have spiritual knowledge, and that will only come by a very practical handling of your life on the basis of the Cross. There are many who are not willing to go through that kind of training. They will go to Bible studies, theological lectures, and all that kind of thing; they are ready for that, but they are not so ready to be put into situations where it is extremely difficult to live, to get on with other people, where you find you are rubbed up the wrong way all the time, and everything goes against the grain. In such circumstances the one drive upon you and the one longing of your soul is to get out of it, to run away and find some other place, some other circumstances; and yet to do so would be to take yourself right out of the hands of God. To remain in His hands means to stay in that situation until the Cross has done its work and you are glad to be there, you are triumphant there, you

have gained the ascendancy spiritually there, and the power of the enemy over you there has been broken. That is your training for the work of God. God can put you anywhere if He has you like that, and you will count; but all the rest may be nothing without it.

(c) Spiritual Influence - the Impact of Christ, Not of People

Then this people must be characterised by spiritual influence. What do we mean by that? Well, we know what we mean when we speak of influential persons. For some reason or other, they are people who count. It may be their strong personality, their personal aggressiveness, their initiative, their conspicuous ability, either inbred or acquired. They are not nonentities; they are positives, not negatives. A lot of that kind of influence has been brought into the work of God, and people have been adjudged influential in the things of the kingdom of God very largely because of this or that natural characteristic, natural acquirement or natural inborn qualities.

Now you may be a giant in natural influence, and yet in the spiritual realm the powers of darkness may laugh at you. Your stature is nothing there, your natural measurement means nothing to them. Your accountability in that realm will be just the measure of your spiritual life; your influence in the spiritual realm, with God, with men, and over the powers of evil, will be spiritual or it will not be at all. So it comes to pass very often that the weak things, and the things which are not, are the very things with which the powers of darkness and men have to reckon, of which account has to be taken. It often happens that if you take stock of some believers you do not think very much of them; you would not give them a second thought; you would put them in the category of people who do not count. But somehow you cannot dismiss them like that. There is something there you cannot explain by their personality or lack of it, by their physical presence, by their training. There is no ground on which you can explain this, and yet you have to acknowledge that they count for something; it is spiritual influence. A people constituted like that are the only people to meet the emergency of this time. Such a people will be the instrument by which God will vindicate the Cross of Christ.

But what does it amount to? To this - everything with such a people has to be attributed to the Lord. That is it. What did we say that God has revealed to be the consummate issue from the Cross? It is this - Christ absolutely transcendent over all other powers, and that expressed in a people. Then so far as that people are concerned the way to this will be by emptying, emptying, emptying - that in all things He may have the pre-eminence. It is the Lord Jesus and not the people that must be in evidence. The evil powers may say, 'Jesus I know, and His servant Paul I know, and that spiritual people I know; but as for you people of pomp and ceremony and natural development, who are you, what are you?'

I hope you are really seeing what the Lord is after. The Lord must be manifested in His universe by means of a people of this kind. The challenge comes to us - will we accept all that it means to be of such a kind?

Spirituality Inwrought by Discipline of Circumstances

Now I must add this before I close. What I have been saying may call for an adjustment or a re-adjustment to your circumstances on the part of many of you. You see, my dear friends, young, middle-aged or old - and let us rule out that 'old' in the light of what we have been saying - it may be that you are as much in 'a training college' now as ever you could be. Going to a seminary or institution would not of necessity add anything to your opportunities of being prepared for the work of the Lord.

That comforts some of you, but it calls for adjustment. If you are in the hands of God, you are in the school of God. What are you being taught, what are you learning, what is the meaning of it? Well, is it to know the Bible better as a book, and all kindred and associated subjects, or is it to know the Lord? Give me the man or woman who knows the Lord before you give me the one who knows all other things without that. Bible knowledge and all that kind of thing is a valuable, important, yes, in a sense, indispensable foundation and addition, but the thing is to know the Lord.

And how will you know the Lord? - in the way in which I have been indicating: knowing Him as your life, knowing Him as your wisdom, knowing Him as your influence. Adjust to your circumstances, to your situation. If I were to appeal for young men and women to come to a course of training, and were to say, 'Now, we are starting a Bible Institute; will you give your lives to the Lord and come and be trained for His work?' I think there would be some who would respond and say, 'Yes, I am going into training for the work of God.'

If you are not already in training, you will never become so merely by going to any such Institute. Adjust to your present situation while it is the Lord's will for you to be in it. Adjust to it as you would to a training centre. Enter upon it with a new adjustment as seriously as you would if you were giving notice at business and packing your bag and going into a Bible Institute. Take that attitude toward your present situation and know that, while you are there in His will, God will teach you Himself; and that is the thing that matters.

He will teach you how to live by His life, how to know Him with spiritual understanding and knowledge, how to exercise and exert a spiritual influence. I am not saying, 'Do not raise the question as to whether the Lord, after a probation and a testing of that kind, is wanting you to move out more fully into His work.' It may be; but I think you see the point of this word. We have got to adjust ourselves to our whole life situation. Many of you could never depart from where you are; but that is your college, that is where you ought to be learning.

But are you? Or are you all the time wanting to get out, merely enduring it, putting up with it, saying, 'Here I am; I suppose I must stay till something else opens up.' What is your attitude? Look at those fellows who row in the boat-race. The time comes when they go into training and they do it with a mind, they do it thoroughly, they set themselves to it. They have one thing in view, and everything has to come into line with that - fitness to fulfil the task before them. We have to take that attitude toward life where we are in the will of God - 'This is a setting in which I am in training, and I set myself to secure all the values possible in this situation of knowing the Lord, proving the Lord, living on the Lord, that I may be qualified to meet the need of the hour' - and it is a great need, a very great emergency, which is confronting the people of God today.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/t-austin-sparks/the-spiritual-resources-of-the-church-for-its-heavenly-mission/>

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