

T. Austin-Sparks:

It would be helpful for us to be reminded of the special nature of this dispensation, which embraces the period from the ascension of the Lord Jesus to His coming again; and it is well for us to be reminded (since it is a tragedy that the Lord's people have not been continually reminded through the dispensation) that in this age - in this dispensation - God's main concern with this world is to take something out of it... and not to do anything with it nor to have anything in it as of it.

Until we have become clear on that matter, we shall be confused on all other matters in relation to the Lord: as to His work, His purpose, and our life in fellowship with Him.

The Lord is pre-eminently occupied with the taking of something out of this world. All the rest is but a preparation of this world for judgment. When that activity of God is finished in the taking out of the earth, then the judgment of this world will take place. So that all the ideas about improving this world and setting up something of God in it as of it - establishing something here for God - are false ideas and will lead into a great deal of error... and, in the long run, to disappointment.

In connection with that primary activity of God in the dispensation the next thing to remember is that this extraction from the earth is mainly spiritual. Of course, the Lord is taking His people literally out of the world from generation to generation, and there will be - at the end - a mighty, literal taking out of the residue of those who look for His appearing; but mainly the taking out through the dispensation is a spiritual thing. The literal, or physical, is but the end of a phase.

That taking out spiritually is, firstly, by a crisis - the crisis of new birth - in which we become aware that we have been born out from another realm and that we are no longer belonging to this one - that in the deepest reality of our beings through new birth we are not of this earth but from above. That is the crisis of our extraction from the world. Then, secondly, the crisis once passed, the extraction, the redemption, or the emancipation (whichever word you prefer) is a progressive thing. It is, in a sense, a pilgrimage - a moving away; and as we walk with the Lord in a true way, we are getting further and further away from this world in a spiritual sense. These are simple and elementary truths, new to no one but necessary of emphasis by way of laying the foundation.

That which remains of God in this world is here for three purposes. We are now referring to that which has come through the crisis and is in the process... but is still here - here and yet not of this earth. While it remains, it remains for three purposes, which are in three different directions: firstly, toward God; secondly, toward itself; thirdly, toward the world.

The Godward purpose of being here is the representing of God's rights in the earth. Just as David, when driven out of his kingdom away from Jerusalem, sent back into Jerusalem Zadok the priest with the Ark as a testimony to the fact that that was his place and he would come back into it one day; so the Lord, who has been driven out of this world, strategically puts His people here as in relation to Himself, representing His rights here. Thus we are called upon deliberately to stand here on this earth against the claims of the usurper, as a challenge to the Devil's claim to be the prince of this world, for the rights of Him whose right it is to reign. We simply stand here toward Him for that purpose.

As to the aspect of this purpose which is toward the thing of God itself which is here, that is for the purpose of its learning the true nature of what is of God. We are left on this earth for the time of our sojourn amongst these other things for the purpose of education, and our education is in the direction of learning what the nature of a thing of God is. We have many lessons to learn - many things to know as to the difference between what is of man and what is of God, what is of Adam and what is of Christ, what is of earth and what is of heaven, what is of the flesh and what is of the Spirit... and our education lies in that direction.

It is a very experimental and practical thing. If you and I were suddenly taken to heaven; that is, if immediately we were saved we were transplanted to heaven, we should know the nature of all that is of God fully, immediately; but we should know it in a way in which we do not know it now. To put that the other way, we are knowing it now in a way which we should not know it if that were the case. We should then know it as objective - as something which obtained all around us... and into which we came in that way; but being left here in the conflicting elements, we are learning it in an experimental way-it is being wrought into us through sufferings,

through contradictions, through discipline, through a great deal of inner history. It is being wrought into our very being, and that is God's way of teaching His people. It is the most profitable way; otherwise, He would have adopted another method.

Then as to the manward aspect of that which is here of God, that is a matter of testimony and witness. Those two words do not mean the same thing. The witness is the instrument itself; the testimony is that which is given by the witness. The Lord must have something here which is the embodiment of the truth; and being the embodiment it gives forth the truth. That is the difference between witness and testimony, and we are here on the earth manward, worldward, for that purpose - to be the embodiment and the expression of the truth. So you see that, while the Lord leaves that which is essential and strictly of Himself here for a time, He does not mean that it is to settle in - to consolidate itself here - to become a part of things here; it is here only for Divine purposes. When those purposes have reached that point where the Lord, in His own wisdom and sovereignty, sees that it would be better that the vessel should be transplanted to heaven, then He takes action accordingly.

All this is gathered up in two features of Christ's life.

(a) As in the world, yet not of it. Into that short sojourn there were packed all the laws of a life which is lived as in relation to heaven, and not in relation to this earth. His position, while here, was in the bosom of the Father - with God, not of this world. He lived by the laws of such a relationship, and He lived thus in order to show forth the fact that man is called to live by God. It is true that He was God. That is not the question for the moment, but we emphasize the other side in order to see why it was necessary for Him to live here; and that is to set forth the fact that man can live on the earth and yet be governed by laws which, if obeyed, make him something other than a man of this world. That may sound complicated, but it can be resolved into one simple fact. He lived a Man in this world, yet not of it; and in order to do so, He had to move as governed by laws which were not the laws of this world but the laws of heaven. That is one phase of His life in which what we have been saying is gathered up.

(b) As in heaven, yet expressing His heavenly life in the Church by the Holy Spirit. All is gathered into that. The Holy Spirit is sent for the main object of "re-living" Christ in the Church and thus constituting the Church one Heavenly Man according to Christ. Thus it becomes necessary for us to know what the life in the Spirit is - what the life governed by the Spirit is. What the Lord is seeking pre-eminently in this age is a spiritual people possessed of a knowledge, an understanding, a perception of Himself which is something altogether different from that possessed by the natural man... and which is, therefore, the thing that is going to abide when all else goes - to endure throughout all testings, all trials. It is the inward knowledge of God in an ever-growing way.

The Lord's concern for us at this time is that we should know what God's mind is as to a spiritual mind, as constituted according to Christ in heaven by the Holy Spirit - the Spirit reproducing in us the life, the mind, the intelligence of the Lord Jesus as God's Heavenly Man. If the great feature of spirituality is spiritual intelligence, which is knowing the Lord in the inner way of His thought, of His purpose, that is what God is after because it is that which is going to outlast everything else. That is what is meant by being in the pre-eminent, the supreme, activity of God in this dispensation. This world and everything related to it is not going to last; therefore, we will not get our roots into it; we will not lay deep foundations in it; we will not build in union with it - with the name of God on it - not even in a religious way. You and I must come into God's supreme activity in this dispensation, which is to get out from this world, in association with Himself, that which, will abide eternally when all else is gone.