

T. Austin-Sparks:

Romans 1:1-6.

In this matter of the world need, everything can be gathered up in one word, "life." It does not matter where we look we find that that is the need.

We have witness borne to that fact in all directions, and we can gather those up into some specific forms of expression.

We begin with the widest range. There is the witness to the fact in the realm of the ungodly. Upon that we need not dwell very much, but it is quite patent that the world outside of Christ is showing in a new way, with a new strength, its desire for life, its need of life. It has its own ideas of how that need is going to be met, and its quest for life takes its own peculiar forms, the forms peculiar to the world's own blindness, darkness and ignorance. Nevertheless it is manifest that the world is seeking life. We do not mean by that that it is seeking its life in God. We do not mean by that that it is seeking what we understand by life, Divine life, spiritual life, eternal life, but it is seeking what it would call "life." Life is the thing which it desires.

Passing from that more outward realm, the general mass of ungodly men and women, to inward circles, we have the witness to this fact which is clearly borne (perhaps, again, largely in ignorance) by what we may call the nominal Church. As to how far the nominal and secular "Church" is alive to the real nature of its need we may not be able to judge, but it is giving very real evidence of its consciousness of a need, and by the means it employs and the methods it adopts it is showing that life is the thing that it is after. The very fact that it is entering so strongly into competition with the world along the line of pleasures, and amusements, and entertainments, and many other forms of occupation, is, on the one hand, a proof that it is conscious of the lack of something to satisfy, and, on the other hand, it reveals that only what it would call "life" will justify its existence. Although perhaps unconscious of the full implications of its ways, it is displaying the fact that what is needed is life, and that only life will satisfy. It would say that to be without these things which it adopts is to be dead, and we in that realm - a very superficial realm - hear people speak very often of "a live religious community" because it has many of these activities. They say: That is a very live Church! and when you ask: What do you mean by being alive? What are the characteristics of this life? the reply is: Oh, it has this, and it has that, it has a dramatic society and a good concert programme, and many other things. That is what is meant by being alive. So its quest is for life; mistakenly, blindly, nevertheless it is all a disclosure of the fact that only life can justify its existence, and only life will meet the need.

Then, moving perhaps a little more inward, we have the witness of those many doubtful and mixed religious movements, with their tremendous sweep, things about which we may well have serious questions, to which we could never give our full heart confidence. We see them as religious movements, as Christian movements, with a Gospel in part, in smaller or greater degree, sweeping the earth, and carrying multitudes with them, drawing crowds after them. We ask: What is the secret of the success of these things? It does not require a very thoroughgoing investigation to disclose that there are serious doubts as to the soundness of their position, of their doctrine. There are serious lacks in some, and there are serious preponderances in others. What is the secret of their sweeping success, and that so many are caught up and carried on by them? The answer is that these things have a semblance of life, they are the offset against a state of religious spiritual death. They are in contrast with what is merely traditional and historic in Christianity, which has become moribund. It is that which is called "life" about them which draws so many after them, which gives to them their success. And in that realm of these successful (?) Christian movements, when you take the long spiritual, Divine view about success, there is a witness to the fact that, after all, it is life that is needed, that the world in every part needs life.

There is a still more inward sphere where we have the witness of the spiritually hungry of the Lord's children. We would not overestimate this; we would not be caught in imagining that things are better in this direction than they are, for you can really only prove that people are spiritually hungry by what they are prepared to sacrifice in order to get their hunger satisfied, and what they are prepared to suffer and endure. But nevertheless, though we might even have to sift this company, there is undoubtedly a hunger amongst the Lord's own children all over the world which is showing itself, which is not difficult to discover. In almost every place there are those who are altogether disappointed with what there is available of spiritual life and food, and the question which is being asked in all directions is: Where shall we get food? The tremendous increase and development of the Convention movement amongst the Lord's own people is one sidelight upon this fact; the fact that, if any servant or servants of God really have something of spiritual food to give they will always find

those who are ready for it, and there is always an open door for such ministry. This, with so many other symptoms, and indications, is a witness to the fact that there is a need, a deep, strong need for life, for what is living, in every realm.

That is the general situation as to the world need. It is all gathered up into that word - LIFE.

What do we mean by Life?

But we must analyse and define the word. If we were to ask any of these people what they mean by "life," I think we should discover, whether they used the actual words or not, that what they think of, what their hearts are after, can be expressed mainly in three words :

(1) REALITY. If you asked again: What do you mean by reality? you would be led to understand that what is meant, and what is desired, is a living experience as over against a theory, a doctrine, a creed, a form; that which comes into the inner being as a living reality. Probably the word "experience" itself would be used by more than would use any other word, and they mean "reality." Life for them means that which is real, as over against that which is only theoretical, mystical, abstract, a matter of words.

(2) POWER. The second thing which would arise in an enquiry as to what is meant by "life" would be "power". We use the word "dynamic" a good deal. It is life, not merely as something active as over against the inactive, but life which is in the direction of power; being able for this or for that, whatever it may be; being put into a position of ability by having the resource of energy, vitality, effectiveness. It is all gathered up into the word "power."

(3) FULNESS. Thirdly, in the definition of "life" we should undoubtedly be led to understand that what is meant is "fulness." Another word which might be used is "satisfaction," but seeing that man is not easily satisfied, it would require a very great fulness to arrive at real satisfaction. So that "fulness" is a feature of "life."

This sums up the world need - life, which means reality, something which comes within the compass of living experience; which means power, dynamic, force, ability, resource to accomplish, to achieve, to arrive, to be effective, as over against being weak, defeated, failing, never reaching a goal - a sense that you have come into a realm where your deepest need is met, and that you need not seek in any other realm for the answer to that need. That is the world need.

We are concerned with the world need, and the Lord's Testimony, so that we may proceed to see in the Lord's Testimony the answer to the world need. We have touched the world at every point, and the Lord's Testimony, therefore, touches the world at every point. We are not going to dwell with the first realm mentioned, the world of the ungodly; and we are not going to be occupied very much with the second realm, that of the nominal and secular Church; we may be more immediately concerned with the other two, certainly with the fourth, the spiritual hunger of the Lord's people, but we may incidentally touch that realm of doubtful and mixed Christian activity.

The Lord's Testimony - the Answer:
"Resurrection."

The Lord's Testimony is the answer to the need at every point, and just as all the need is summed up in the one word "life," so all the answer, as represented by the Lord's Testimony, is summed up in the one word "resurrection." A very superficial reading of the New Testament will make it perfectly clear that "resurrection" is the key word to New Testament Christianity. If you have not gone through the book of the Acts, for instance, marking the occurrences of the word "resurrection," and noting their connection, you have missed one of the most profitable, helpful and important studies of that book. It is the key word to the Christianity of the New Testament.

"Resurrection" has also to be defined, just as we have defined "life," and we look to the New Testament to define its own terms. "Resurrection," as defined by the New Testament, means also four things:

Firstly, it means an entirely new position for man. Let us give full weight and force to every word; an entirely new position for man. "Resurrection," then, means that there is nothing of the old left, that all is new. It means that man is in a position which he has never occupied before, and that in that position, there is none of that obtaining which has obtained before. One of the most important things for all the Lord's people to know is that resurrection in union with Christ does mean that everything as to position must be entirely, utterly new.

Secondly, resurrection means that the basic message of Christianity is the Cross, because there can be nothing new in this way until all that is old is put away. In order to secure that all is new the Lord very definitely cuts in between the new and the old; and the Cross, therefore, is basic to resurrection, because resurrection has no meaning only in the realm where death has taken place. It is futile, it is foolish, to talk about resurrection with Christ without recognising that it presupposes death with Christ, and that the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, for any spiritual value in us, demands that the death of the Lord Jesus shall also have had a spiritual effect in us.

The Testimony of the Lord is in resurrection, which means an entirely new position for man, and unto that an utter winding up of the old position, with all that is related to it.

Thirdly, resurrection means, on the positive side, an entirely new power in man. This power is not of man, not in any form, of any kind. Life and work in resurrection union with Christ is on the basis of the power which comes from God alone, and not one bit of it from man. It is here that there has been such sad failure in apprehension, that here man can do nothing, man is a minus quantity, man can provide no ground of power for the accomplishment of what lies in the realm of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus. Everything in that realm is of that nature, that no human power can achieve it either in life or in service. Is it not strange that, although that is made so clear, and although that might be generally accepted as a fact, the whole history of the Church and the history of the majority of Christians contradicts that, that the Church and multitudes of believers have sought both to live as Christians and to do the Lord's work by energies of their own. Look at the enormous amount of human energy which is poured into Christian activity and counted upon for the accomplishment of Christian ends. Almost entirely what is called "organised Christianity" is upon the basis of man projecting and developing plans, programmes, schemes, enterprises, purposes; and drawing in all the human resources of mind and brain, of will, of material, of interest, of enthusiasm, to accomplish those ends, and at the end of these many centuries we find something which, with the enormous development, falls far short of a few short years at the commencement of the Christian era in its power of accomplishment.

See the power of accomplishment in those first years. See how things went down before the Lord's Testimony at the beginning. See how every force which opposed it had to yield. See how even mighty empires, in putting forth all their resource to quench that Testimony, were themselves quenched, while the Testimony went on. And see today the ability of world forces to resist the Testimony, to stand against it, to hold it up! (Perhaps we are wrong in saying the Testimony; we should say organised Christianity.) What is the meaning? The answer is to be found here, that in resurrection union with Christ the power is altogether other than that of man. It is an entirely new power, to which man has got to yield, and not that which man has got to take hold of and use or try to use. It is an entirely new power, all of God.

Fourthly, an entirely new knowledge is bound up with resurrection. Here is what is called "revelation." On resurrection ground there is, for those who are truly there in a living, spiritual way, a new knowledge which is of the character of Divine revelation by the Holy Spirit. To put that in other words, it is a direct teaching of the Holy Spirit to the heart of the believer of that which relates to the Lord Jesus. That, as differing entirely from accepting a Christian history, a Christian tradition, a Christian story, a Christian doctrine, a Christian creed, something which has become commonly accepted as being the interpretation of Christianity through the centuries, but that which comes directly to the believer as the work of the Holy Spirit in revealing Christ to the heart; revelation, not apart from the Word, the Scriptures, but through the Scriptures; not just grasping the letter of the Scriptures and knowing what is in the Bible as you might know what is in any other book (although you might regard the Bible as different and superior to all other books); but as a shining through the Scriptures, so that the spiritual content is disclosed, not all at once, but progressively, very largely through experience. It makes necessary the trials and adversities and difficulties, situations of perplexity; paving the way for a disclosure of Christ to meet that particular need. A living, active, practical unveiling of Christ to the heart by the Holy Spirit, an opening up of the great realm of eternal, spiritual reality, as gathered up in the Person of Christ. Resurrection means an inward knowledge after that kind.

We may add one other thing. Resurrection means an entirely new fulness. That is, resurrection means the limitless; moving in the realm which has no bounds. A living, spiritual experience brings that consciousness upon you, so that it matters not how long you may have gone on with the Lord, and how much the Lord may have taught you, how full may be your apprehension of the Lord, you are very conscious that you are only yet at the beginning of things, and it matters not how long you go on, you will always remain there, that you are only at the beginning of things. You have come out into the limitless, and there is infinitely more to be known than all that you have known and do know. But the heart is at rest, satisfied in Christ.

Resurrection brings that consciousness, that you have come into fulness, but that fulness is so much beyond you that you know quite well that you can go on for ever. It is a very blessed thing to have ministry in that realm. The question of too many in ministry is: Shall I be able to last out? I shall soon exhaust all the texts in the Bible, and what is going to happen then? It seems that multitudes of preachers have exhausted all the texts in the Bible, and have gone outside for their texts! Resurrection is what is needed. It brings into this realm of a new position, a new power, a new energy, a new fulness, through the Cross. That is the Testimony of the Lord for the world need.

Gathering all that up, and putting it into other words, it means this: The need which is supplied in the Lord's Testimony is, firstly,

An Experimental Knowledge of the Meaning of the Cross.

That is a far more challenging statement than may dawn upon us at the moment. We look into every realm where we see spiritual death, or, as we have put it, the need for life, which means that there is death more or less, and we ask, in every one of those directions where there is death, What is the cause of the death? What will be the way of life? We find that the cause of death is the fact that either there has been ignorance of or rejection of that meaning of the Cross which has an inward application. In many realms that meaning of the Cross is not known. It is an altogether new revelation. All that is known about the Cross is that objective work, grand and glorious, but only a part of what Christ has done for us by His Cross; and there is little or no knowledge of that vast realm of that other important, essential aspect of the Cross, that what Christ has done for us has got to be made good in us. That is, if He died for us, the effect of His death has to be registered in us, and we have got to die with Him. And Christ in death as us is not only the death of sin, but the death of the natural man. He may be a very good man according to the standards of this world, but in the death of Christ, with all his goodness he has died, as well as with all his badness.

That is accepted in, shall we say, an intermediate realm of believers as a doctrine, as a truth, but it goes no further. In another realm that is rejected, and what is called the subjective side of the Cross is refused. You will find in all those realms a lack of spiritual life. There may be much truth, much doctrine, what is called "light." There may be a good tradition, and a history in the past which was mighty, but you will find there death now, a severe limitation of spiritual life, and you can trace it basically to this fact that the full meaning of the Cross in an experimental way does not obtain there. Therefore the need is for the Cross in its fulness to be brought again into this world, represented, expressed in the lives of the Lord's people.

That means, secondly, that

The Power of His Resurrection has to be made Manifest again in this World.

The thing which muffles the power of God, which neutralises its expression, works against its exercise, obscures its manifestation, is uncrucified man. If you want to know the power of God nakedly active, all that numbing, deadening, muffling, uncrucified natural man must be got out of the way.

If Paul was an example of the power of God working through a man, then Paul is a clear example of how that which is natural as a ground of strength and wisdom has been set on one side, for this man has been brought down to a very low place of utter dependence upon God for his very life, not only spiritually but physically. "We despaired even of life," he said. "We had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead."

Then, thirdly,

A Holy Ghost living Revelation of Christ.

Not preaching and teaching about Christ, but a Holy Ghost revelation of Christ. These are the things which gather up what we have said.

Unto the meeting of this need there must be vessels. There must be individual vessels, and there must be collective vessels, though they be small. There must be ministries, in all of which these things are true, that the Cross has become a very real thing in the setting aside of what is of nature, of man, in which the power of His resurrection is the power which is being exercised, the power which is of God and not of man, in which there is a living apprehension of Christ by the revelation and illumination of the Holy Spirit.

The World Need: "Life"

The world need in every sphere is life. The answer of the New Testament is, Yes, but resurrection is the life that is needed. Resurrection means, first of all, a place of death, so that there can be resurrection. That is the Cross in its fulness. There must be the working of that Divine power which is all of God and not of ourselves. That must obtain and reign in vessels. There must be not doctrine, not teaching as such, not what is called "light," but there must be revelation by the Holy Spirit through the Word, so that there is a growing apprehension in a living way of the fulness of Christ. This is resurrection, and this must be expressed, exhibited, maintained in vessels, individual and collective, and in ministries.

Now that is a general survey of the position. There is a great deal more gathered up into that than we have time to mention, but, that being the need, we see the direction in which prayer is needed. We are brought back to seek the Lord with real purpose of heart that, as to ourselves and as to His Testimony in this earth in the nations, He will move to bring these things into a place of reality again, the real meaning of the Cross, where man does let go, and entirely resigns from the work of the Lord in a right way; that is, where what is of man ceases and gives place to what is of God. But where that is done through a definite experience of the Cross initially and continually the Lord will do a new thing. In a word, the Lord would have crucified men and women, crucified companies of His children, thoroughly crucified instruments, living in the power of God, which is the power of resurrection, living under an open heaven, with the Holy Ghost revealing Christ to the heart. This is the direction for prayer, that He will raise up a ministry after this sort.