

T. Austin-Sparks:

"Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be mine own possession from among all peoples: for all the earth is mine: and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and a holy nation. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel" (Exodus 19:5,6, A.R.V.).

"And bring thou near unto thee Aaron thy brother, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel, that he may minister unto me in the priest's office" (Exodus 28:1).

"Ye also, as living stones, are built up a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God through Jesus Christ... But ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession" (1 Peter 2:5,9).

"And he made us to be a kingdom, to be priests unto his God and Father" (Revelation 1:6).

"...and madest them to be unto our God a kingdom and priests" (Revelation 5:10).

"Blessed and holy is he that hath part in the first resurrection: over these the second death hath no power; but they shall be priests of God and of Christ" (Revelation 20:6).

When we come to look into the Word of God, from the beginning to the end, to discover what the service of God really is, we find that it is always set forth in terms of priesthood, or what priesthood means. We are not concerned specifically with the priests or Levites of the Old Testament as a class or system or order in themselves. They are there to set forth spiritual meanings, and we are using them - that is, we are using the Word of God - to discover the spiritual meaning of service. I say that because these words - 'priest', 'Levite', and so on - suggest a subject, and they can be very technical. There is a great deal of what is technical connected with the priests and the Levites, and I am not attempting to deal with it. There are many technicalities to which we make little or no reference - for instance, the question as to where the priests end and the Levites begin. Sometimes they are put together and are called "the priests, the Levites": at other times the priests are put in one category and the Levites in another. But such technicalities are not concerning us just now.

All God's People Called to be a Serving People

What we want to get at is this: What is the service of God, and what are the principles and laws of that service? And so we approach this matter by way of looking inside the framework to secure the spiritual meaning. So, taking up this matter of the Levites, we begin with the fact that they represent or set forth the service of God. They set it forth in this way, that the Lord's people as a whole are called to be a serving people. This is quite clear from the passages which we have read, right through the Old Testament and right through the New Testament to the end. There is a very trite and hackneyed phrase, which has lost its edge by familiarity and constant use - 'We are saved to serve' - but that does mean what it says! It may perhaps seem unnecessary, and yet perhaps it may have a reviving or refreshing value, if I emphasize this point at the outset - that it is made abundantly clear by the whole Word of God, in both Testaments, right on to the end of the Bible, that the Lord's Church is called pre-eminently to be a serving Church.

But of course, this can only be true of the whole as it is true of all its parts - which just means that there is no such thing, in the thought and purpose of God, as an inactive, un-serving member of the Church. If ever the Levites were not functioning, everything was wrong, and that means that, if you and I claim to be in the Church of God, we are, according to the very thought of God about His Church, supposed to be serving Levites. You will not take that name on yourself, I am quite sure. You will not go out into the world and tell people you are a Levite. You might perhaps tell them you were a missionary, or something like that. But it means that you are supposed to be a Levite, and if you look at the Levites and their history, you will see what God means you should be.

In the full unveiling and revelation of this truth, it comes out at last that priests and Levites were not, in the thought of God, a separate, detached, isolated body of people, but the whole nation, in the thought of God, was meant to be what they were. We will return to that presently, but just begin with this: that the nation - which is the Church, which is God's own possession - is, in God's thought, meant to be in active, Levitical service, in all that that means. We begin very low when we begin there. But let us begin right at the beginning, and challenge our hearts, and say, 'Now then, what does my Levitical priesthood, my Levitical service, amount to?' You ask your heart that before the Lord. What does it amount to? That is a very, very important question. We will not

stay with it, but we begin with it.

The Levites, and their priesthood, bring right into view the fact that God's primary thought for a redeemed people is service. The service may be many-sided and varied, as we shall see, but service is the characteristic of the people of God, if His own thought for them is realized.

Bringing God and Man Together in One

But what is this service? When you ask, 'Now, what did the priests and Levites set forth as to the matter of service?', you have to say: It was nothing less than the bringing of God and man together in one. There had come about a rift between God and man. We know about that, we know where it took place, we know just what happened; but there it is. God and man are apart, there is a big gap between. And it is not only a gap, not merely distance, but there is a condition of positive conflict - conflict of natures, conflict of interests, conflict of realms - in short, enmity. Enmity is that which makes a distance. It is called 'alienation' (Eph. 2:12). God and man are at variance in their natures. And the whole service of the people of God, as set forth in the Levites and the priests, was to stand in the gap and put the hand of man into the hand of God, and the hand of God into the hand of man; to come between and to bring about union - of course, in virtue of sacrifice, in virtue of shed blood, but that is another aspect.

The service was thus to represent, to set forth, the fact that God does not accept this state of division. God never intended it, He does not accept it, and He has provided against it; and here are those who know in themselves, in their own history, in their own experience, what it means to have peace with God, to be united with God in life (as we were saying in our last study); to be there themselves, and so to set forth God's mind in this matter of union in a practical way.

That is service - not to talk about the doctrine of atonement and redemption and reconciliation, but to be that. The Church can have all the fundamental doctrines of atonement, and so on, and still not be a unifying factor itself, still be divided, still maintain divisions. The important thing about service is to unify, not to talk about it; to set forth the ground of oneness, and to live on that ground. We shall probably have more to say about that at another point.

Preserving the Ground of God's Presence with Man

And then, as consequent upon that, the further object of service was to set forth and preserve the ground of God's presence with man. The whole issue of the Bible is just that - God's presence. The last thing in the Bible is the declaration: "The tabernacle of God is with men, and he shall dwell with them, and they shall be his peoples" (Rev. 21:3). That is the end finally reached. It was always God's desire from the beginning to dwell with man, to be present. So the real service of God is to set that forth actually. If the Church were fulfilling its priestly ministry, wherever men and women came into it they would meet God. They would say: 'God is here. These people are not only concerned with correct doctrine and teaching and with proper practice and form. You meet God when you meet them.' We are failing of our service to God unless, as the effect of our being here, God is found in the midst of us - unless God is found in us first of all individually, and then, when a few individuals are together, He is all the more found.

That is the importance of relatedness in Christian life and fellowship, and that is the thing that Satan hates and is against - the gathering and abiding together, in life, in fellowship, in the Spirit, of the Lord's people. It is something very great. "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I..." (Matt. 18:20). The real ministry, so to speak, is to provide a ground for God, and to bring God in so that He is found there.

May the Lord save us as a people from ever being an empty shell! The Lord save us unto this - that men know where to find God: if they want to find God, they know where to find Him. That is so very largely not true. Many go round, searching for God, wanting God. They try this place and they try that place - and go away disappointed. 'No, He is not there. The form may be all right, and much may be quite good, but I have not met God.' Do let us always, wherever we are, hold strongly to that, that when we come together, people are to find God amongst us. We are bent upon that - the presencing of God. This is a principle so clearly set forth in the early books of the Old Testament - of course in the first place in relation to Israel - the presencing of God.

Service in Relation to the Testimony of God

In the third place, the service of the priests and the Levites was in relation to the Testimony of God. The central object of their service, their work, their ministry, was the Ark of the Testimony. That was at the heart of

everything; they gathered round that ultimately. It was the final thing, the ultimate thing. They were gathered round that, and they ministered in relation to that. The Ark was entrusted to them on their journeyings. There is much of detail - and very, very important detail - connected therewith, but we state again the simple truth, the simple inclusive fact, that their service was related to the testimony of God: and the testimony of God is the testimony of Jesus, just as that Ark was in type and figure the Lord Jesus in His inclusive, essential, mediatorial Person. It is the Lord Jesus, it is the testimony of Jesus.

And what a testimony that Ark bore! Let that Ark come up against anything, and see what happens. Let it come up against the Philistines or the Philistines come up against it, and see what happens. Let Uzzah put forth his hand and touch that Ark, and see what happens. The testimony of Jesus is not something in word alone. It is not a theory, it is not a type, it is not a figure. It is an impact, and the service of the Lord is to register the impact of Jesus Christ. We fail altogether, if, with all that we may do and say, that impact is missing. Oh, let us pray for a recovery of the impact of Christ, that by our presence there may be a registration of Him.

The Lord Jesus, when He was here in Person on the earth, could be nowhere without registering His presence. Demons cried out at once before He had said anything. All the evil forces were stirred. Men governed by those evil forces could not keep silent: they found that they had to do something about Him - anything to get rid of Him, to quench Him. On the other hand, people in need sensed that their need would be met in Him. He just could not be present and be hid.

Service, then, means bringing Christ in as a registration upon situations. That is what the Church is here for, and what you and I are here for: we are here in relation to "the testimony of Jesus". When John used that phrase, as he did so often, especially in the book of the Revelation - he said he was in Patmos "for the Word of God and the testimony of Jesus" - he simply meant that he had been sent there because he stood for the testimony of Jesus. It would be far better to be sent to Patmos than to be ignored. If men can be indifferent, if they can just leave us alone, and not send us either to Patmos or to 'Coventry', there is something wrong with us. If we are really doing the work of God in a priestly way, something has got to happen, even if it is cruel opposition.

A Representation of God's Full Thought

A further thing about this service so far as the Levites were concerned was that they embodied and set forth in representation God's full thought concerning all His people. Let me remind you of the events in Exodus 32, which we were speaking of in our first study in this series. There we see a crisis, a crisis through and by which the Levites came into their place. What had happened was that God had said beforehand (Exod. 19:5,6) that Israel should be to Him a kingdom of priests. That was the Divine thought. And then He followed by saying: 'Bring near Aaron and his sons' (Exod. 28:1) - the Divine thought taking shape. And then Moses goes into the mount, and is with God forty days and forty nights. Toward the end of that time the people weary of his absence, and there then follow the events of which we read in chapter 32.

The people call Aaron and ask him to make them gods that should go before them - 'for what has happened to this Moses who brought us out of Egypt, we know not.' And Aaron gives way, weakly, very weakly, and has to cover it up with a lie. If you compromise, you will always have to add a lie presently. And he makes them a calf of gold. (You notice the lie. It says definitely that he worked it: he wrought it with a chisel (vs. 4). When he described what happened to Moses, he said he threw the gold into the fire and, as though by magic, a calf came out (vs. 24). You always have to resort to magic, if you get yourself into a tight corner by prevarication and lies and so on. That is by the way.)

Moses came down, heard as he came down, saw, was very wroth, and challenged Aaron, as to why - why - why he should have let the people in for this sin, with its inevitable judgment. And then Moses went and stood in the gate, and threw out an uncompromising challenge. (Notice the form of his challenge: 'Whoso is on Jehovah's side, to me!' (vs. 26). So there is another side that is not Jehovah's. That is very discriminating at this point. Whose side is this? Well, that touches very, very vitally upon the whole matter of service. However, let us go on.) At that point the sons of Levi went over to Moses in the gate. Moses said: 'Put every man his sword on his side, and go throughout the whole camp, and slay every man his brother, his friend, his neighbour'. And the Levites did so, and they did it thoroughly, and at that point the tribe of Levi was set apart for this ministry.

Now, God's thought was that all the people should be like that. He had said so (Exod. 19:5,6). But the people as a whole failed - failed God and failed of their calling, their vocation - and so God raised up, so to speak, this 'Israel within an Israel', and thus the tribe of Levi became the embodiment or representation of God's full thought for all His people.

Representation: that is what is true of them in more senses than one. You know that it was the firstborn in all the houses, the homes, the families of Israel, who were the priests. Now the tribe of Levi takes the place of the firstborn in all Israel. The half shekel of silver (Exod. 30:13) becomes the symbol that they have taken the place of the firstborn. So they become in representation 'the Church of the firstborn ones' (Heb. 12:23). The very number of the tribe is also significant in this matter. It means representation, if you look at it. We will not dwell upon that, or go further with it; it is one of those details, but it is significant. The point is that it was when the nation as a whole failed that the Levites were taken, to become those who set forth - by embodying in themselves - God's full thought for His people, that they should be serving priests.

Now, this is a very delicate point, but we have to face facts: and the fact is this - that the whole of the Lord's people, although redeemed, although His by redemption and by atoning Blood, are not fulfilling this priesthood. The people of God as a whole are not living up to their calling, are not fulfilling their heavenly vocation. That was true in Paul's time. The ministry of Paul was so largely - we might say mainly - to get Christians to live up to their calling. His prayers for believers were that they might apprehend their calling, 'the hope of His calling'. So the fact has been, from so soon after the beginning, that, as a whole, the Lord's people do not express His full thought.

But God reacts to that failure, and sets to work to get those who will. The peril has always been, and it is a peril into which many have fallen, to say, 'Well, things are as they are, everything has broken down, it is a state of failure: we had better make the best of a bad job, accept the situation, and do the best we can.' God has never so compromised, and He never will. He did not just patch up that situation at Sinai. He definitely and concretely reacted to it in the Levites. Now, do not interpret that necessarily as a separate body of people. That is our peril - to think that here are the general people of God, and here is another class of people who are on a pedestal, very much better than the general. Beware of that. But, while we say that with great emphasis, we also say, with equal emphasis, that God's heart is set upon finding amongst His people those who do answer to His full thought.

So that the Levites represented what God meant, and not what God found later on, or what came about in a general way; and that is service to God. And it is a very costly form of service. While God really seeks to have 'all men saved and come to a knowledge of the truth', His heart is really set upon a people who satisfy Him as to the fullest thought that He has ever expressed, and that is priestly service: representation, in the midst of failure, in the midst of departure, in the midst of weakness, in the midst of tragedy, of that which satisfies God. Take that to heart. That is service - service on the highest plane, service in the fullest realm. Service, in the most essential sense, is not to be doing a lot of things for God, but to be sure of what God wants most, and then bend everything to that.

The Levites Related to the Whole Matter of Life

Then, further, the Levites in their service were related to the whole matter of life. We touched on this a little in our previous study. The great characteristic of the Levitical service was that everything should be living. 'Livingness' was the great feature. They were really up against death. Death, the great nullifier - spiritual death - had entered by sin, and they were up against it; and their ministry was, on the one hand, to nullify the power of death, and, on the other, to make everything live, to see that everything lived. Everything was to be living. I do want you to grasp this. It is so important that 'livingness' characterize the Church in every part of its life and activity.

We have the Lord's table. It was there in symbol in the Tabernacle. Is this a form, is this a rite, is this the 'Lord's Supper', is this the 'Communion Service'? What is it? It is supposed to be, meant to be, a ministration of life, a testimony of life. If you and I come to the Lord's table and that does not mean to us 'livingness', if there is not something about this that is living, well, it has missed its meaning. We are a people of the table. The table is supposed to be a living thing: so much so that in Corinth, because of a touching of that table in an unworthy manner, the people met something. Many were sick and some died (1 Cor. 11:30). This thing is living. It is as though the Lord would say: 'You cannot just come to this, touch this, without it meaning something, and without your meeting something.' It should be like that.

Oh, may God hallow the table! God make the table to live! Lord, make the table a challenge! Lord, make people afraid of that table, if they are not going to adjust to its meaning! Yes, it would not be a bad thing if there were such an effect, such an impact about this, that, if there were carelessness or wrongness of approach and wrongness of state in coming to it, it led to actual suffering or affliction. But that is the dark and cloudy side, the shadowed side. On the other side, it should be living. Theirs it was to keep things living.

And everything else must be like that in the house, in the tabernacle. Is it the altar of incense - is it the prayer life? We need a word on this, friends. There should be something tremendously living about our prayer life, and our prayer life together as the Lord's people. We do not just come and say prayers and offer requests - no, no, no, it is a question of life, of effect, of 'livingness'. Is it the lampstand of truth, of revelation, of illumination? Is it the revelation of Jesus Christ? Oh, there is a great deal of difference in teaching. We may have good addresses, very good teaching, all very true, absolutely true; and yet - and yet - what have we got afterward? What do we take away? Do we go away more living than we came? Have we met life that has challenged us, exposed us, illuminated us, elevated us? This is the service of God. Oh, to have companies of people, the characteristic of whom is livingness: livingness in prayer, livingness in fellowship, livingness in teaching - all living!

That is power. The Levites did minister in the power of this life. It is something tremendous. Let anybody come in, interfere with this, take this on, and see what they meet. There was power present in their service.

The Continuity of Life

And then a further thing about the life was its continuity. God made a covenant, as we read in Malachi, with Levi, a covenant of life and peace; and although Levi deviated often, seemed as it were to go underground, and was often in a state most reprehensible, yet the Lord goes on, and in the end Levi survives. Although the old typical system passes with the old dispensation, there is more life in the New Testament than there was then. The Lord Jesus, as the great Levite, as we saw in our previous study, commenced His Levitical ministry at the age of thirty, just as the Levites did - and oh, the life of this Levite! Was Paul a Levite? Surely he was, and many another.

But note, this life of the covenant goes on. What is the principle of continuity? What is the principle of succession? It is not that someone has a position or an office, and when he dies someone else has to take his place, go into his office and position, and so on, in a kind of formal, ecclesiastical, 'apostolic succession' principle? Not that at all. The principle of succession in the Word of God is Divine life. As soon as Divine life departs, you had better shut down the whole thing. Any church or system that has not the life has lost the very reason for its existence. The principle of continuity is life. The Lord save us from losing the tremendous factor of life and becoming resolved into a mere 'thing' with a teaching and form.

And when we have said that, we need only say further that life - this livingness, this power, this continuity, which are the elements of this life - is incorruptible. That means that it is a life of absolute purity and holiness. As soon as corruption is allowed to come in, the life is suspended. The Lord will not let His life go on where there is corruption. Holiness is essential to life. Allow sin to persist and you find the life is suspended. The Lord will not go on with us.

So the inclusive characteristic of the Levites, as the Lord's servants, was life.

Spiritual Warfare

I mention just one other thing: the matter of spiritual warfare. I wonder if you have taken note of this? Going back to the passage in the book of Numbers, 4:3 "...from thirty years old and upward even until fifty years old, all that enter upon the service, to do the work in the tent of meeting" - you notice that the margin tells us that "the service" is literally "the warfare", "to do the work in the tent of meeting". "The warfare... in the tent!"

Now, that indicates a difference of kinds and realms of warfare. Others in Israel were called for the warfare of the nations. They could start at the age of twenty. They were more numerous: every young man, as soon as he reached the age of twenty, was eligible for the army. The Levites started ten years later at the age of thirty, but it says that they entered the warfare for work in the tent of meeting. This is a different kind, a different realm of warfare. It is not conflict with the world. They had to meet the world and the nations: Joshua became their commander-in-chief in that realm; but here is another kind. It is an inner kind of warfare. I am not going to make a lot of it, except to point out this: that, when any of us begin on this basis to serve God in relation to His full thought for His people, we meet a peculiar kind of opposition. It is an internal kind. Such ministry has to be fulfilled amidst strange opposition, an opposition that is directed against the Christ dwelling within.

Many of you know that that is true. We put it in many different ways from time to time. When you become a Christian, you know that you are precipitated into conflict with the world: you are up against it, and the world is up against you, and you become a soldier of Jesus Christ in that realm. But when you become one who is going to serve God in relation to all His intention concerning His Church, you meet something other - and, mark you,

you will meet it amongst the Lord's people themselves.

There was a time when there was a movement to oust the Levites from their particular position by people in Israel who wanted to usurp that position. They were jealous of them, they criticized them, and took steps to nullify them. God met that movement in His own jealousy for this very thing. He must have His full thought represented. He was very jealous about it. But the point is this, that there is a strange, unexpected kind of warfare related to the full purpose of God. It is spiritual. It is not carnal warfare at all. It is not with the world. Give it terms from Scripture if you like, but the fact is that you find yourself having to fulfil your ministry in the midst of opposition which comes from very much nearer than the world.

Spiritual warfare: oh, yes, it is so wonderful to glimpse the great eternal purpose of God, the "unsearchable riches of Christ", the "exceeding greatness of his power" - these superlatives, all true. Yes, but do not forget that while half of the letter to the Ephesians is occupied with the superlatives of Divine purpose and calling and blessing, the other half contains superlatives in relation to conflict. You get conflict of a fuller, higher and more terrible nature in the 'Ephesian' realm, if I may put it like that, than you do anywhere else, because that brings into view God's ultimate purpose for His people.

The Spirituality of the Levites

Well, this is the meaning of service, the cost and nature of service. It is tremendously real to God. So we gather it all up into one word. Here is particular and peculiar responsibility. Look again at the Levites - not as a class; dismiss that from your thoughts - and see their spiritual meaning. I would like, in closing, to dwell briefly upon some things which seem essential to complete and round off this presentation, such as the spirituality of the Levites. Spiritual men is what they represent. Now it is not possible - I say this with hesitation and with regret, but it is true - it is not possible to say that all the Lord's servants are spiritual people, really spiritual people. Many may be very devout, very much in earnest, but as persons they are not all spiritual persons.

Look at it like this. When these Levites came into being, as in that thirty-second chapter of Exodus, on what ground did they come into being as functioning Levites? Well, the whole nation, because Moses remained in the mount so long, had lost patience. Why did they lose patience? Because they wanted things seen, and they could not endure things not seen. The principle of the life of Moses was that he "endured, as seeing him who is invisible" (Heb. 11:27). That was something they could not do. They must see; things must be tangible, must be present, must be within the realm of the senses. Religious things - yes; things of God - yes; Moses - yes; but it must be within the compass of our senses, that we can see and handle and have evidence before our very eyes.

Now spirituality is just the opposite of that. It is going on with God in faith. Jesus is in Heaven. "Though now ye see him not", says Peter, "yet..." (1 Pet. 1:8). We are going on. Peter's line of things is different from Paul's, as we know. Peter's line of things is 'pilgrims and strangers here'. Peter consistently says: 'though now we see him not'; 'we are pilgrims and strangers.' 'Our greater Moses is in Heaven, but we are going on our pilgrimage'. Paul's line of things is 'seated in the heavenlies in Christ'. Both sides are right. But the Israelites could not go on until they could see. They must have a god that they see. So - 'make us gods to go before us'.

But alas! they do not see what they are doing, what they are letting in. What was all the gold for that they had brought out of Egypt? It was for the Tabernacle and the service of God. It was the gold of the sanctuary. Satan found advantage by their carnality, and stole the gold of the sanctuary, and turned it to his own worship in the place of the worship of God. Spirituality sees through. These Levites were spiritual men. They saw through this. Spirituality sees something more, sees the ultimate significance of things. Oh, for men with spiritual discernment - men who can see through and get hold of the ultimate significance, who can see where this is leading, how this will work out, where this comes from, what this means, what is really the nature of this thing. Carnality and spirituality, you see, are two different things amongst the people of God, and the Levites were spiritual men, the embodiment of spiritual perception.

Again, work out this principle of spirituality. What was required of them? "Gird every man his sword upon his thigh" - 'and slay every man his enemy'? 'Get even with that man with whom you have had a grudge for so long'? No - 'slay every man his brother and his friend and his neighbour'. Brother, blood-kin; friend, neighbour; heart-relationship. This is a test of spirituality. You need not make it literal, unless you like. Sometimes it comes down to that, if we are putting father, mother, sister, brother, children in the place of the Lord; sometimes it works down to that very literally. But spirituality means that nothing that is of our natural life is allowed to influence us when Divine principle is at stake, however dear, however costly, whatever it involves. Friends and dear ones must not stand in the way of God's full purpose. If they have come across the purpose of God, or if they threaten it, I am sorry, but I must take the sword: and as I take the sword to them, I take it to my own heart.

Levitical Priesthood

But: "Whosoever shall seek to gain his life shall lose it: but whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it" (Luke 17:33). You know that that word 'life' also means 'soul'. The sword to our own souls - that is spirituality. It is very searching.

Well, all this, as I was saying, amounts to taking responsibility for the Lord's highest interests. It is costly, as the Levites knew. It was by sacrifice, it was by blood, it was by tears. Yes, it was costly; but therein lay the preciousness to the Lord. He is jealous for that which answers to His own heart most fully. The Lord give us grace to be true servants - true 'Levites'.