

'A Sign'

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Holy Spirit's commitment to purpose is the key to the Church's impact on the world and its spiritual authority.

Scripture: Ezekiel 1:26, Ephesians 1:9

Topics: "The Role of the Holy Spirit", "Divine Purpose"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of the Holy Spirit in revealing God's purpose through the Church and individual believers, drawing parallels from Ezekiel's prophetic ministry. He highlights the dynamic incentive of purpose that drives men of the Spirit, the impact of that purpose on the world, and the necessity of spiritual authority in the Church. Sparks warns against the disintegration of purpose within the Church, urging believers to recognize their role as vessels of God's message, much like Ezekiel, who was a sign to Israel. He concludes that true authority and impact come from a clear understanding of God's purpose, which is essential for the Church's effectiveness in the world.

Transcript

Having laid the foundation upon which to build, we proceed with the superstructure. We have noted that the Holy Spirit is committed to make real, in history, in an elect people, and in individual Christians, the meaning of the Man in the Throne (Ezek. 1:26; Eph. 1:9-23). Israel's history - in blessing and rejection - is solely interpreted by this fact. It is the historical, temporal, and earthly side of the all-embracing truth. The Church, from Pentecost onward, is the embodiment of this truth in a spiritual way, and its glory or shame is governed by the measure in which the Holy Spirit is allowed to have His place in lordship.

Our next step will be to consider some distinctive features of these energies of the Holy Spirit.

The first of these is:-

1. A Dynamic Incentive

It is not difficult to see that men of the Spirit have always been in the grip of a captivating objective; mastered and dominated by a sense of Divine intention. In the case of Ezekiel, who is an example of all that we are saying, it is said right at the beginning of his vocation: "The word of the Lord came expressly unto Ezekiel". Here is the element of precision, urgency, and definiteness. The sense is traceable throughout his ministry. Dates, places, and measurements are meticulous. Discouragements,

withstandings, and frustrations there were in abundance. Times were when he had to keep silence, but the fire flamed up anew, and the overmastering purpose carried him on again.

How true this was of the Apostles and of the Church in the earliest days. The Holy Spirit was truly in charge. He was the Custodian of God's eternal purpose in Christ, and Christ as the Divine Horizon was made the passion and dominating objective of all whom He mastered. It was so clear cut, so single-minded, so uncompromising, so all-consuming. Yes, Purpose was the dynamic-incentive of their life. That Divine Purpose came to them "expressly".

The next thing to note is:-

2. The Impact of Purpose

It was this dynamic of purpose which accounted for the impact that was registered upon people, situations, and the evil powers.

There was nothing tentative, indefinite, a beating of the air. Rather was there directness, deliberateness, and effectiveness.

This is more than a statement of fact, it is an explanation and it is a challenge. Can it be said that, in our time, because of an all-consuming and clearly-defined purpose, the Church is registering an unmistakable impact upon the world, locally and more widely?

The one all-important note which is so manifestly lacking in the Church at this time is the note of authority. This was a recognized and acknowledged feature of the Lord's presence and ministry when He was here in person. This also was an unmistakable characteristic of the Church in early days. The loss of this spiritual authority has led to many alternatives and substitutes, so that the present system is one of pretence, make-believe, show, striving after effect. The efforts and failures are pathetic.

But what is the essence of authority? It is not forcefulness of expression, neither is it strength of conviction. These and many other things may, or may not, accompany true authority, but they are not authority. The essence of authority is, that what is said or represented carries in its very truth the power of destiny. Sooner or later, that presentation will show itself to be a criterion. People and things will stand or fall according to the attitude taken toward it. In a time of upheaval, shaking, testing and trouble, people and work will stand or collapse, and the cause will be - in either case - that which God gave. The truth will be vindicated. This is borne out so evidently in Israel's history. This is what lies at the root of the first three chapters of the 'Revelation'. This is the explanation of the triumph or tragedy of so much that had its origin in God, and of many Christian lives. Authority is something that will have to be measured up to, you cannot get away from it. In spiritual things it is God. There can never be something of God present for which we shall not have to give an account. The Holy Spirit always speaks with authority, and when He speaks, destiny is present. As "all authority," has been given to Jesus, God's Son, in Heaven and on earth, the Holy Spirit presents and testifies to Him as the Horizon of judgment and destiny. There is impact when Christ is preached in the Holy Spirit. The proof of reality is not in the form of teaching, however orthodox and right. Neither is it in the form of practice and procedure, however correct. Isaiah was told to "declare unto my people their transgression, and to the house of Jacob their sins", and then was added, "Yet they seek me daily, and delight to know my ways" (Isa. 58:1,2). The truth and reality is in the spiritual impact that brings people face to face with God.

The next characteristic of the Holy Spirit's energies is:

3. The Intelligence of Purpose

If, as we have said, 'Ezekiel' and 'Ephesians' are pre-eminently stamped with this element of Divine Purpose, it does not require deep investigation to see that spiritual intelligence is characteristic.

With Ezekiel it is: "I saw visions of God" - "I saw". The wheels that accompanied the "living creatures" were full of eyes. There was a continuous 'showing'. The element of clear, vivid, and meticulous perception was present in relation to the goings and purpose of God.

In 'Ephesians' we have, "that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ... may give unto you a spirit of wisdom and revelation... that ye may know". The Letter itself is one of unparalleled spiritual intelligence, and this 'knowing' is exclusively bound up with "the eternal purpose".

An essential result of the Spirit's government and work is spiritual knowledge. Paul laid much emphasis upon this in both of his letters to Corinth.

Where the Holy Spirit has the ground of Christ to work upon there will be much light and intelligence among the saints. The tragedy of the average believer, and of many companies of believers, is their spiritual ignorance, their little understanding, the smallness of their apprehension of Christ. Why do not the Lord's people read such parts of His Word as, for instance, 1 Cor. 2; 2 Cor. 3, 4, and 'Ephesians', with the registration that what is there is God's mind for them to have by the eye-opening, revealing work of the Holy Spirit?

4. The Integration of Purpose

When we look at those parts - or that section - of Ezekiel's prophecies which have to do with the existing condition of Israel, we see a people disintegrated, scattered, and disrupted. God's view of them was revealed in the vision of the valley of dry bones: many - very many - bones: spread over the valley; unarticulated and unco-ordinated: bare, dry, and useless by reason of their dividedness. What a true picture of the state where the vision of God's all-integrating purpose has been lost! How true are the words we read in Proverbs 29:18: "Where there is no vision, the people cast off restraint [fall apart; go to pieces]".

The mighty movement of the Spirit in the valley was not just motivated by the desire to have the bones together - "bone to its bone" - and clothed and covered. It was governed by the purpose of Israel's election, to be the channel through which - after the flesh - God's Son would come. Unity is always - in God's thought - to bring Christ in in fulness. To hinder that all hell is set on the disintegration of the people of God.

The real incentive to union is the recognition that by it the fulness of Christ will come in. This is 'Ephesians', and if 'Ezekiel' ends with the triumphant shout, "The Lord is there", it is the effect and result of the vision and apprehension of the Man on the Throne, and God's purpose concerning Him.

Immediately after the Cross the disciples and the followers of Jesus were very much like the bones in the valley. The metaphor is changed but the effect was the same. "I will smite the shepherd and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered abroad" (Matt. 26:31). Scattered and peeled! Helpless and shattered! But note the effect of the Spirit's energies on the Day of Pentecost. Gathered and integrated! Co-ordinated and

unified! Clothed and nourished! They were on their feet - an army. The integration was truly the effect of the energies of the Spirit, but the great feature of their integration was the vision and power of the Divine purpose concerning Jesus Christ. The book of 'Acts' is the book of Purpose energized by the Holy Spirit, and it is the book of concerted action on that basis.

No wonder Satan delights in and works so hard for division, especially where the vision of God's purpose in His Son is most fully and clearly present.

God's Reactions in Purpose

History is marked by repeated reactions on the part of God. We have devoted a whole book to show something of these specific reactions (God's Reactions to Man's Defections), but it is necessary to mention it here in special relation to the Purpose. We have seen that God's method and instrument in this matter has been an elect people. Election particularly relates to purpose, it is not willy-nilly, nor arbitrary. To fail in the matter of purpose is to nullify the election and to lose - not essentially salvation, but certainly - the inheritance, i.e., that specific inheritance connected with the vocation.

The Old Testament representation of this is Israel. The nation was "an elect nation" for a particular purpose. The whole nation was called according to that purpose. When the body as a whole lost its vocational character it was rejected and sent into exile. The vocation was recovered in a Remnant. This Remnant was a rebuke and example to the whole. When eventually and ultimately Israel - the nation - forfeited their vocation among the nations by rejecting the very One who was to justify both their election and their existence, they were rejected and lost their place among the nations, as for the last nearly two thousand years.

The Church as the eternally elect body then came in in relation to a far greater and higher purpose than that related to Israel. Let it be emphasized that the existence of the Church is bound up with purpose. Failure here will mean spiritual Babylon, i.e., confusion, bondage, weakness, and frustration. But God reacts in a Remnant - "Overcomers"; and throughout history a thin red line of faithful and true witnesses - individual and corporate - is traceable, when the general state has been decadent.

It is very instructive to note the way of the Spirit in His movements to recover this government of purpose. The movements and their features are all so consistent and harmonious with the object.

Note, then

(1) The Spirit's Sovereignty in Function

Ezekiel had his function entirely changed by the Spirit's government. The prophet was really a trained priest. Youths of priestly lineage were meticulously trained for their office up to the age of thirty years, when they entered upon the work for which the training was to fit them. At that age (Ezek. 1:1), when he should have taken up his active priestly function, Ezekiel had all that particular training set aside and was called into the work of a prophet. This was a complete change of function for which he had received no special training. It is impressive to note that the same was true of the one whom Jesus called the greatest of the prophets - John the Baptist. John was of priestly lineage and family. His father was an acting priest. But the sovereign will of God and the energy of the Spirit changed all that and called upon John to function in another way. Jesus, although not of priestly tribe or lineage, was God's High Priest and essentially filled that capacity. But in His earthly ministry He was "...a prophet mighty in deed and word..." (Luke 24:19). In

each case the hour demanded the Prophet, and God sovereignly changed the function to meet that need. Strange, unlikely, and unexpected choices and means are made by God when He has a special purpose on hand. The instruments might complain of natural unfitness, lack of training or qualification, but the Spirit takes full responsibility and sovereignty is justified at the end.

Then note

(2) The Essential Vocation

In keeping with the purpose among the nations, and not as exclusive to the instrument, the inclusive title of the prophet is noted. Ninety times in 'Ezekiel' the designation "Son of man" is used. Among the Prophets this is peculiar to Ezekiel. We know that the favourite title chosen by the Lord Jesus Himself was "The Son of man". Only twice in the eighty-two times where it occurs was it used by others.

There is a similarity and a difference. Ezekiel has no article: he is just "son of man". Jesus always has the article "The Son of man". The similarity is not in Person, but in Vocation. The infinite difference is in Person.

The vocational similarity is found in the meaning of the title. It is that of identification with man; representation of man. The idea is a very large one; it brings into view God's concern for mankind. Not Israel, but all mankind is God's concern. Man has ever been God's particular interest. It was when man was created that God found His rest and pronounced His satisfaction on all. There was no evening to that Day.

Israel's vocation was meant to be to all men. The Church's vocation is to "all the world". Christ is identified with and representative of man in the thought of God. This is the essential feature of the prophet's ministry, which ministry is to reveal the Man, and to lead to Him. Anything that puts the minister in a separate class and marks him off as apart from other men is a violation of a principle of the Spirit's way, and will, sooner or later, prove to be a limitation among men. Ezekiel said that he "sat where they sat". That was not the condescending act of a superior, an official, one of a special class. No, it was a man amongst men, seeing with their eyes and feeling with their hearts, yet seeing with the eyes of God and feeling with the heart of God. Jesus adopted no garb, habit, tone of voice, or badge to mark Himself off as different or apart from others. There was ample prejudice, suspicion, criticism, and that kind of thing to question His authority, and He never tried to overcome this attitude or get any advantage by artificial, official, or formal means. Nothing was assumed, put on, or feigned to make an impression and gain acceptance. The Holy Spirit of anointing was His sole basis and source of authority. That was enough and the centuries testify to it. Note then again, the title chosen by Him and linked by Him with every phase of His life and history was not one that men would look upon with honour, respect and awe, but "the Son of man". Different indeed, but in nature, not in anything external. At the same time remember who He was! He "emptied himself... and being found in fashion as a man..." (Phil. 2:7,8). That is said of the One who, in His own right, was equal with God.

What we have been saying is still further conveyed in other designations attached to Ezekiel. God's method in relation to purpose is the matter which is before us.

(3) The Vessel as "A Sign"

"Son of man... I have set thee for a sign"

"Say, I am your sign." (Ezek. 12:6,11; 24:24).

The prophet himself was a sign. There were many signs, but these were God's ways with the prophet to make him the sign. Those ways of God with His servant were not ordinary and usual ways. They were unusual, singular, and often very enigmatical, incomprehensible, and inscrutable. The thing to note is that with God the history of the vessel was the history of the people pre-written. He went through their history in advance of them. He not only prophesied, he was the prophecy.

Paul, the Apostle, was a sign of this dispensation in this way. If Paul was "a chosen vessel" for the special purpose of bringing in the particular purpose of this dispensation, namely, the revelation of the Church, its nature, place, and vocation in the eternal counsels of God (the stewardship of the mystery, he called his ministry); then Paul's history ran along those lines from his conversion to his departure to be with Christ. We make the observation without embodying the great amount of evidence here.

Is this not a law of God when Purpose is in view? Those who are "the called according to his purpose", and especially those - individual or collective - who are instruments or vessels of the Purpose, are taken through quite unusual and, otherwise, inexplicable experiences. Theirs is no ordinary way. The Purpose unto which they are called, if they are committed to the Holy Spirit, will be wrought into their very beings. Theirs is no studied or second-hand ministry. They are the message before they speak it. For them to have to hand up their message would be to part with their very life. It is a very costly way, but would we have it otherwise? Such a ministry is only possible if a total break with all else has been made. Ezekiel had to do things that made him a laughingstock to others. Sometimes they thought that he was mad. Whatever they thought and said, the time came when they could see their own experience in the light of his personal history. They literally went the way that he had gone symbolically. How effective was his life with God!

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