

Its Nature

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the transition to a new form of worship centered on spirit and truth, challenging traditional practices in Christianity.

Scripture: John 4:21

Topics: "True Worship", "Transition of Dispensations"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the transformative nature of worship as articulated by Jesus in John 4:21-23, highlighting a significant shift from traditional forms of worship to a new order defined by 'spirit and truth.' He argues that this transition challenges the existing structures of Christendom, as it calls for a deeper understanding of worship that transcends physical locations and man-made representations. Sparks points out that Jesus embodies truth and serves as the true Temple, contrasting with the outdated systems of worship that were merely types and figures. He warns of a current shaking within Christianity, urging believers to discern what is truly of the Spirit versus what is merely tradition. Ultimately, he asserts that true worship is not confined to a place but is a spiritual reality governed by the Holy Spirit.

Transcript

In the first message of this series we laid the Scriptural foundation with John 4:21,23, Matthew 18:20, Matthew 28:19-20 and Acts 15:17. We concentrated our attention upon the very great significance of three words spoken by our Lord to the Samaritan woman in the context of the great transition: "The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth... God is a spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and truth." In that context Jesus used these three words: "Neither" (in Samaria), "Nor" (at Jerusalem), "But" (in spirit and truth).

We pointed out that this indicates, and postulates, first, a change of dispensations; second, a change of order; and third, a change of nature. "Neither... nor" dismisses one dispensation with its form and order. "But" introduces a new and other order and nature.

Before proceeding to the new nature of worship inaugurated by the coming of God's Son, Jesus Christ, we must lay further stress upon this change. To a very large extent this challenges Christendom and Christianity as it exists now. The very words used by Jesus above carry with them such a challenge: "Spirit and truth". Can we deny that He implied - at least implied that what had obtained as represented by the Samaritan temple in Mount Gerizim, and the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, was not "Spirit and truth", but, at most, a type, a figure, and a man-made representation? It was form, not spirit; it was artificial, not true. An

immense amount of the New Testament opens up when we get this John 4:21,23 key intelligently into our possession by the Holy Spirit. Our minds faint in the presence of so much, and we feel confronted with an impossible task as we contemplate coping with it. We can do no more than give hints and indications. May the Holy Spirit do the rest!

In the first place, we must remind ourselves that Jesus said of Himself that He is the Truth. He said also: "To this end have I been born, and to this end am I come into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice" (John 18:37). By implication He said that He was the true Temple (John 2:19). In contrast with the Jewish 'false shepherds' He said that He was the true Shepherd. In contrast with the old Israel as the Vine (Psalm 8:8-16, Isaiah 5:1-7, Jeremiah 2:21) He said "I am the true Vine."

This conception of truth in relation to His own person and work is one of the major features of His coming into the world. If we take up this word in its seventeen occurrences in John's Gospel alone we cannot fail to be immensely impressed. Then follow it through into John's Letters; and finally see it in the great consummation in the Revelation - "The faithful and true". Paul speaks of the truth - "As truth is in Jesus" (Ephesians 4:21). Jesus, as the Truth, is contrasted with Satan, the liar. But He is also contrasted with all representations, types, symbols, outward forms, etc., which were - and are - not the true, the real. When our Lord spoke of His body as the Temple, deliberately refraining from the fuller explanation because of the fixed prejudice of His hearers, He introduced the great truth of the transition from one dispensation to another, and the complete change in the nature of temple and worship. It was because Stephen saw this and declared it that he was murdered by these very people. Said he: "The Most High dwelleth not in houses made with hands" (Acts 7:48). Paul said the same to the Athenians (Acts 17:24). This does not mean that God never came into representations when they wholly corresponded with His thought. Both the Tabernacle and the Temple were "made with hands" and God came into them in power and glory, but not to commit Himself to the thing. The time came when He forsook both and He was no longer found there. They were only temporary representations and His presence was conditional. The "true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man" (Hebrews 8:2) is "not of this creation". The whole Letter to the Hebrews has to do with this change from the earthly and temporal to the heavenly and spiritual. Hence, He is no longer in "temples made with hands".

To come right to the point: the New Testament teaches that the Temple in this dispensation is a Person, and persons incorporated into Him through death, burial and resurrection, and 'baptized into one body by one Spirit' (1 Corinthians 12:13). We must also remember that Jesus foretold the passing away of that entire temporal system, with Jerusalem as its centre and representation. This actually came to pass, and it has not been recovered so far as Jewry is concerned. That Letter to the Hebrews takes up the prophecy of Haggai (Haggai 2:6,21) wherein is predicted a two-fold shaking of all things with a view to testing their temporal or eternal nature; and Hebrews 12:27 says that only the things which cannot be shaken will remain. This is a kind of summary of the Letter. The things which can - and will be - shaken are the figures, representations of heavenly things, the "things made with hands". The things which cannot be shaken are the spiritual, the heavenly; which are the true!

May it not be (and we put it in question form just to draw consideration), may it not be that we are now really in the universal shaking? There are large realms in which it is being said, and believed, that Christianity has failed. In Christendom there are many who have abandoned faith in the old teaching and beliefs of Christianity. There is a great sifting and falling away. There is an intense testing of all who are in any way connected with Christianity. Yes, 'shaking' is the right word, both as to things earthly and things

heavenly. The issue will be just as to what is true, and what is otherwise; what is really of the Spirit, and what is of man, tradition, and outward form.

If this great shaking is going to head up to what Peter said, with prophetic illumination as to the nuclear age, "the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up... these things are thus all to be dissolved..." (2 Peter 3:10-11) (a thing which we know to be all too possible in our time) what will remain but what is "spirit and truth"? This issue is being forcibly pressed in the nations, in Christendom, in evangelical Christianity, and in the experience of the Lord's own people.

This is the first and basic thing as to the fact and nature of the present dispensation, and of the great transition from the past. It will be intensified as the next transition of dispensations get nearer. With His foreknowledge of the passing of the earthly, temporal and material things; places, systems, fixed locations, and outward forms, the Lord Jesus put the whole matter of survival upon Himself as the constituent of a spiritual structure against which the very powers of hell would not prevail. Against fixed localizing and systematizing of Himself and His presence He was emphatic, and history is evidence of how right He was. If, according to John 3:16, salvation is a matter of "whosoever", the Lord's presence and true worship, according to Matthew 18:20, is "wheresoever". The Lord is no more sympathetic toward being bound to this or that location than He is to making Paul or Apollos, or Cephas a gathering centre. Over against this very tendency in Corinth Paul wrote: "...with all that call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place, their Lord and ours" (1 Corinthians 1:2). Exclusiveness, with its tragic entail of endless divisions, can only result - sooner or later - from a violation of this fundamental principle! That is all on the negative side, as warning and admonition; but what blessedness there is when - all things apart - it is only the Lord as the definite and consistent gathering object and delight! "Neither" ... "Nor" ... "But" in spirit and in truth.

Let it not be thought that, in dismissing one tight legal system governing His presence, He was putting nothing definite in its place. His thought is far from a nebulous generalization, a nondescript go-as-you-please kind of 'liberty', an independent free-lance unrelatedness. The law of His presence is a very definite and positive one; it is government by the Holy Spirit. This will not allow us to do as we like or go as we please - the misuse of the "wheresoever".

This is strictly - the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, and the measure of Christ, the measure of life, the measure of power, and of fruitfulness, depend entirely upon how much we recognize and move into this essential nature.

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