

The Church's Vocation

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Church's vocation is to stand in the gap for a testimony against the Evil One's display of power and glory, and to maintain a position of fixed repudiation against the Evil One's claims, while standing as a testimony to God's rights and kingdom.

Scripture: Matthew 4:1, Matthew 4:8

Topics: "Spiritual Warfare", "The Church's Vocation"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the Church's vocation as standing firm against the temptations and pressures of the Evil One, drawing parallels between Jesus' temptation in the wilderness and the Church's role in prayer. He highlights the importance of recognizing the true nature of God's kingdom, power, and glory, which are often hidden and not displayed like the ostentatious offers of the enemy. The sermon calls believers to maintain their testimony and faith in God's eternal promises, resisting the allure of immediate gratification that leads away from God's ultimate purpose. Sparks encourages the Church to occupy a prayerful position, standing in the gap for God's rights against the adversary's claims. Ultimately, he asserts that the Church's mission is to uphold the truth that God's kingdom, power, and glory belong to Him forever.

Transcript

"Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil... Again, the devil taketh him unto an exceeding high mountain, and showeth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them and he said unto him, All these things will I give thee, if thou wilt fall down and worship me. Then saith Jesus unto him... Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve" (Matt. 4:1,8-10).

"Bring us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever" (Matt. 6:13).

"Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil."

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"...showeth him all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of them; ...said unto him, All these things will I give thee if thou wilt fall down and worship me."

"Deliver us from the evil one: For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory for ever." As one who greatly believes in the Revised Version, perhaps it becomes necessary to say just a little word here, because the Revised Version leaves that Doxology out of the text and puts it in the margin. It is a very great question indeed as to whether the Revisers were right in doing that. Out of some fifty original authorities, only eight omit that Doxology, and therefore an overwhelming mass stands for it; and personally I feel, and I believe a great many others feel, that there is every reason in the Word of God why it should be retained in the text. For me, the greatest reason is the significance of it, and I have tried to allow the Word itself to suggest that significance by bringing together these two different parts. I am quite sure that most of you have perceived the complementary element in these two passages, how they go together in principle, how they are a part of each other in meaning. We shall, therefore, seek to abide rather in that realm of spiritual values than of mere technical interests, with regard to the Word of God.

We are not going to dwell upon fine points in what is called "The Lord's Prayer", but to look at some great spiritual features which come up in this great final clause of the prayer. "Bring us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one: for thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory" - Kingdom, power, glory, as belonging unto the Lord for ever and ever.

The Real Issue Behind Temptation

The first thing of which we take note is the significance of that little conjunction, "for". "Deliver us from the evil one; for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory". Carry that back to Chapter 4, where the kingdoms of this world and the glory thereof are offered by Satan to the Lord Jesus, and refused with a reminder from the Scriptures: "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God and him only shalt thou serve." That surely corresponds to the first declaration, "For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory". Bring us not into trial, but rescue us away from the Evil One; for Thine is the kingdom. When you translate the words thus literally, you get nearer to their significance. Trial in this particular respect from the Evil One's standpoint would have as its objective the inducing of us to have the kingdom as on the lines of this world and lose it as on God's lines; for that is exactly what it meant in the case of the Lord Jesus. That is the essence of the enemy's pressure and assault, to bring us down and to cause us so to compromise for an easier way as to come into present possession of a kingdom on earthly and temporal lines, and miss the great thing which God has reserved in heaven for us. That is the object of all Satan's trying of us, as of the Lord Jesus, and it was because the Lord Jesus was able to see through the enemy's strategy and effort and detect what he was after in offering something seen, something tangible, something present, something great, apart from suffering and sacrifice and in the place of that which was eternal in the heavens, though costly for the time being; it was because the Lord Jesus was able to detect this, and perhaps feared that His Church would not see through the enemy's strategy, that He said to the Church, 'Pray thus: Bring us not into trial, but rescue us away from the Evil One'. In other words, Save us from falling a prey to this subtle thing which, under intense pressure, would make us turn away from the kingdom; unseen, heavenly and eternal, to something offered us now, glorious apparently, yet in reality a thing which must come under Divine judgment and be destroyed and prove to be an empty substitute for the great and glorious thing which God has for them that love Him.

Now that has a very real message for us in itself. I have no doubt that it goes to the heart of everyone of us, for we all know that kind of pressure and temptation from the enemy. It is ever present. Ah yes, and when adversity is strongest, the evil most intense, the suffering keenest and the way before us most obviously the way of the Cross and of rejection and of ostracism and of loneliness, then the enemy's suggestion, to turn aside and have something here and now, both gathers force and gathers point. If only

we will let go something and take a lower level, a less utter position, we can have something; we can have some of the glory of this world, we can have a kingdom now. Thus he is ever seeking to bring us into a position where, with that fiery dart, he can lay us low and rob us of the kingdom. The Lord Jesus says to His own, "Fear not, little flock; for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Luke 12:32); but Satan is always seeking to offer a kingdom as well.

The Vocation of the Church

Well, that is only a fragment of the message in these words. There is always bound up with the simplest and briefest statement from the lips of the Lord Jesus a very great deal of Divine meaning, much more than lies on the face of things in the actual words themselves. Thus here in these words, amongst the most familiar words on Christian lips, in what is called "the Lord's Prayer", we have something of tremendous meaning. It has been but little recognized, but it can be caused to stand out by bringing together these passages from chapter 4 and chapter 6 in the way we have done. To me, it says so clearly that the Lord calls His people to pray and to take up a certain position in prayer. That position is set forth as a stand for God's rights against the counter-claims of the adversary, the claims of the adversary to power, to authority, to the right to give, and to glory. On the one side, he displays himself as one who is in a position, and that of great authority and power, and he seeks to show off his power, to make us conscious of his power in respect of his position, and this, of course, unto his glory. On the other side, there is God. God is not always vaunting Himself, nor making His authority and His power and His glory a matter of display. Between these two stands the Church - the people of God stand in the gap - and this prayer puts the Church in a parallel position to that of the Lord Jesus in the wilderness. There, on the one hand, we see Satan standing out and making a display of his authority and his power; that is, of his rights, what he can do, what he has the ability to do; and of his power and of his glory. On the other hand, God! But where is the display of power authority, glory? It is hidden, it is not in manifestation at all. In between the two, the Lord Jesus is standing as in the gap and repudiating this that is demonstrating itself, for that which is not seen, not at the moment manifest, but which to Him is the supreme thing, far more real than this and, moreover, eternal. "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God and him only shalt thou serve": For Thine, not his, is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever.

The Inward Nature, Character, and Cost of True Testimony

But that is taking a tremendous stand when you are in a wilderness and have nothing whatever to prove it, and all you are conscious of is of the fierce and bitter assault of the Devil in power and ostentation. It is something which belongs to an inner relationship. Do you see the significance of that? The point, beloved, is that the Church is called to stand in that gap and, toward the ostentatious display of assumed right, authority, power and glory, to maintain a position of fixed repudiation; but toward that unseen spiritual, eternal, heavenly reality of the kingdom and the power and the glory, not now ostentatiously displayed, but hidden, to stand as a testimony. And when you have said that, you have summed up the Church's vocation. In this prayer, the Lord Jesus puts the Church there. These petitions may become personal, but remember, the Lord Jesus did not say, 'When you pray, pray after this manner - My Father'. No, it is "Our Father". The deepest and the inmost reality about the Church is that it is a family, and that means that it is the glory and power and kingdom which has become the real concern of the Church.

This is not some temporal thing, this kingdom, this power, this glory. This is something which is our Father's, and we have an inner, heart relationship with this. That is what I meant just now when I said it is a matter of an inward relationship. Our King? True, He is our mighty Potentate on high. Yes, quite true, but

not so presented here. "Our Father": "Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory"; and what is implied is a repudiation of any kind of relationship with that other one and all that belongs to him.

Well now, all that I have to say for the present is wrapped up in that. What is the Church's vocation? To occupy the position into which it is put by the Lord Jesus in prayer; to stand in the gap for a testimony, as over against all that is display and ostentation and demonstration from the Evil One, to the fact that "Thine is the kingdom and the power, and the glory". That is not a mere testimony in words. Oh, if all the people who use those words so frequently, perhaps almost every day of their lives, as a formula, really came into the spiritual meaning of them, what a time they would have! What an awful time they would have! You know it is true that we cannot really in a spiritual way make a declaration without drawing upon us some challenge. In a formal way, out of the mere mental conception or by way of learning by heart, you can say anything, go to any length, and not meet any challenge at all. But come into the wilderness in the power of the Holy Ghost and say something, touching ultimate forces, and then your testimony - Thine is the kingdom! - will become more and more a grim thing, and there will be times when, in face of the enemy demonstrating fiercely and furiously, you will be on your knees simply wrestling to hold to that position - Thine is the kingdom! - nevertheless, Thine is the kingdom! It is standing in battle for something. Thine is the power! Thine is the glory! That is what we are here for, to maintain that position for God. That issue is becoming a very real one for many of the Lord's children today in an outward way, as well as in a spiritual.

The Conflict for World Dominion

Now, just look at these three words - kingdom, power, glory. They represent two histories from eternity to eternity. On the one hand, Satan seeking a kingdom, world domination; displaying power, terrible power. Look at it today: awful power, ruthless power, startling power, to that end - world domination. That has been so all the way through the centuries, Satan seeking to build his kingdom, and in doing so displaying his power, and making for himself a reputation, glory. Is this not reflected in some of the great episodes in the Scriptures? Is it not that which is seen in Egypt? A kingdom, a sphere of supreme government in the earth, power, display of power, glory, and all at the expense of what was of God; for the chosen seed was brought under that power in that kingdom to be made the instrument of that glory. The Pyramids, again, an abiding monument to the fact that a great world power or kingdom exploited something that was of God for its own glory. Of Babylon the same may be said. "Is not this great Babylon that I have built for the royal dwelling place, by the might of my power and for the glory of my majesty?" said Nebuchadnezzar. Daniel, interpreting the dream, "God hath given thee a kingdom": but that kingdom, that Gentile kingdom, was taken for the glory of a man and not the glory of God; and that was the interpretation of the dream. Nebuchadnezzar was driven from amongst men to have his habitation with the beasts of the field, because he gave not glory to God in his kingdom, and when he came back and his reason returned unto him, and he walked again in Babylon, his great proclamation was to this effect, This God of heaven is the only God.

So we could pass down history and see it repeated again and again. But today we have it perhaps more manifest than ever. A kingdom, world domination, a display of awful Satanic power, all for the glory of Satan in the Antichrist eventually, so that he, sitting in the Temple of God, claims to be God, taking God's place. A kingdom, power and glory in the place of God.

I said that many of the Lord's children are right up against that thing in a literal, as well as a spiritual way today. How far all will be involved in the outward and literal expression we do not know, but we are all involved in this thing spiritually. It is a mighty thing that we are in.

There is the other side - His Kingdom, His power, His glory. But the ground of the testing for us is that His Kingdom now is not a Kingdom to be seen, His power now is not a power which is being outwardly displayed, His glory now is something which is in the heart in a spiritual relationship and knowledge of Himself. It is what He is, what we know Him to be. The Church has to stand for that against this other. It comes down to us in our lives every day, is pressed home to us, and is going to be pressed home - to be able at all times to stand under intense trial and say, "Thine is the kingdom". Ask friends just now in certain parts of Europe whether it is easy to say that right into the face of the Lord as the hordes of iniquity sweep on and do their devastating and devilish work and seem to meet with so little power to resist or throw them back, and no display from heaven. It seems they are doing as they will. Then ask these children of God whether it is easy to say after all, Nevertheless, Thine is the kingdom, and Thine is the power, and Thine is the glory! It is a very living question. It presses in upon faith. That is where we are. That is our vocation, that in the heavenlies in a spiritual way we stand for God in the breach and maintain in spirit and in faith that testimony.

A Final Word on Temptation and Vocation

Let us get away from all the romantic elements, (if indeed there be such,) of a great world situation, and see that this comes right down to our own personal life. It is the supreme question in all our personal trial, our sufferings, our afflictions, and all that we meet at the enemy's hands. It lies behind all our temptations; for all temptations are one in essence. The one end of them all is to force us, or entice us, to let go the heavenly for something that may be had here and now. All trial has that at its heart. You know quite well that in the secret place, under trial and difficulty and adversity, it is always this question that is cropping up - 'Must it be like this? Is it necessary for it to be this way? Are we not being too utter, too heavenly? Could there not be something of real gain if only we were to (we would never use the word) compromise?' Yes, that is what it means; to let go a little, slacken a little, drop down a little. In some form or other, that is the heart of all our temptation, and the question which it raises is whether we are standing for God's rights or for something that will come to ourselves.

Now have you got the heart of it, of this temptation of the Lord Jesus in the wilderness? In order to stand firmly for the rights of the Father right through to the glorious issue, He had persistently to refuse to listen to suggestions which would bring Him advantage, get Him out of a difficulty, make His way easier. Showing Him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, the Devil said, "All this power will I give thee and the glory of them..." The Lord Jesus refused. "Thine is the kingdom"! If we go to Daniel, we meet the same declaration: 'The kingdom is the Lord's! He gives the kingdom to whomsoever He will. He will give the kingdom to the saints'. We will wait for that, we will stand for that, and we will repudiate the other. Whatever Satan might give us would be a very poor substitute indeed.

I do wonder if you see the point in this word. It is simply one thing. The Church is here, by the Lord Jesus, placed in a position. It is a prayer position, and the earnest of that which is fully developed in Ephesians 6, the conflict with principalities and powers, world rulers of this darkness, spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenlies; and we are bidden there to pray with all prayer. The Church is to function in prayer against an assumption, against a demonstration, against a claim, against an ostentation, against presumption on the part of the Evil One, all of which is to get us drawn into his domain and under his power, and to use us for his glory. To resist that, to stand against that, to stand clear of it all for God's rights is the Church's business. Thine is the kingdom: Thine the power: Thine the glory, for ever and ever! That is our calling, that is our vocation. There is much more in it than that, but that is where the thing begins, where the Lord Jesus puts His people by this prayer as in a testimony to God's rights, against the one who would deny the

Lord those rights and appropriate them himself. The Lord strengthen us unto it.

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