

The Contrast Between the Old Dispensation and the New

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Holy Ghost has come to take up the Old Testament and show that there is something more - something more than all that earthly, perfect technique of the Word of God.

Scripture: Acts 1:6, Acts 13:27, Revelation 19:10

Topics: "The Role of the Holy Spirit", "Old vs New Covenant"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significant contrast between the Old and New Dispensations, illustrating how the Jewish rulers in Jerusalem failed to recognize the deeper meaning of the Scriptures, despite their familiarity with them. He argues that the coming of the Holy Spirit introduced a new understanding and application of God's Word, moving beyond mere verbal statements to the living voice of God. Sparks highlights that true spiritual insight requires the Holy Spirit's guidance, which reveals the divine implications of Scripture, ultimately pointing to Jesus Christ. He warns against the dangers of rigid adherence to tradition and the letter of the law, advocating for a dynamic relationship with the Spirit that fosters genuine spiritual growth and understanding. The sermon calls believers to yield to the Holy Spirit, ensuring that their inner lives align with God's eternal purpose.

Transcript

"For they that dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they knew him not, nor the voices of the prophets which are read every sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him" (Acts 13:27).

In a way, that verse is the key to the whole of the book of the Acts, for this book is really an interpretation and exhibition of the principle that is at the heart of that statement - that is, that there is the Bible with its verbal statements, its record of utterances and activities of God through men, and it can be read and re-read for a lifetime, as it was in the case of the people referred to here, and yet the real significance may be missed. In other words, there is in it something more than the actual verbal statements. You may have the statements, the letter, the volume, the whole record, and you may know it as such, as these Jewish rulers did, and yet you may be missing the way, you may be moving on a plane altogether other than that which God intended. This book of the Acts, from beginning to end, shows that there was something more in the mind of God when He inspired men of old to speak and to write than is discernible in the actual words which they used, and which requires the activity of the Spirit of God if it is to be heard and grasped

and understood, and if it is going to work out as things worked out in this book - in power, in effectiveness.

There is much of the Old Testament in the book of the Acts, and in the New Testament as a whole. The prophets are very much quoted, but see the difference between the effect of the words as used in the book of the Acts and the effect upon those who merely heard or read the actual utterances of the prophets. The Holy Ghost has come; and He is not making another Bible, He is using the old one; but it is a new book with a new meaning and a new effect, and you are amazed at times at the way in which He uses Scripture. You never saw that it meant that; it is something altogether beyond a former apprehension, although you knew that Scripture quite well in a way. There is a difference, and it is a crucial one.

So these people in Jerusalem and their rulers heard every Sabbath the prophets, but failed to hear their voice. They missed something - the voice of God coming through, the meaning of God in what was being said, as distinct from the mere statements. It is possible for a company to be gathered together and for one to be speaking the word of the Lord, and for some merely to hear the words and go away and say, 'He said so and so,' repeating what was actually said in verbal statements. It is at the same time possible for others to say, 'I never saw it like that before; I knew that passage of Scripture, but I never saw that!' Something, not only of a fresh recognition but of living value, has been detected. That is the difference between the words of the prophets and the voice of God through the words of the prophets.

So, as I have said, this verse in chapter 13 is, in a way, a key to this whole book. It makes this discrimination, which is so very important, between the letter and the spirit, between the statements and the Divine meaning in the statements. One is death and gets nowhere. The other is life and goes right through.

ALL PROPHECY POINTS TO THE LORD JESUS

Let us now glance at the book of the Acts. We go right back to the first chapter with this principle in mind. It might be well for us to be reminded, in parenthesis, that, speaking broadly, the whole Bible (but for a few verses) closes upon a comprehensive statement about this very matter. In Revelation 19:10, we are told that "the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy." What does that mean? It simply means this - that all the way through the Bible, from the beginning onward, there has been a predictive element in this sense, an element of implication, something implied beyond the actual words said at the time. In it all there has been a pointer onward. It may be an historic incident, something quite local and immediate in itself as to time, place and persons concerned, but in no part of the Bible is only the local and present in view. There is something more - there is an implication, there is a pointer onward; and if you could see where all these pointers point to, you would find it was Jesus. He is implied in everything, everywhere.

When we speak of prophecy, do not let us limit our thoughts to certain times and certain men of the Old Testament. True, we have been, and are very often, occupied with the prophets whose books are included in the 'prophetic' section of the Old Testament, but we have to expand beyond that. Moses was called a prophet (Deuteronomy 18:15), and Samuel was a prophet (1 Samuel 3:20), and even David in the New Testament is called a prophet (Acts 2:30). The spirit of prophecy embraces more than a certain class of men whom we designate prophets. The spirit of prophecy goes right back, as far back as Enoch; no, further back than that - to Genesis 3:15, concerning the seed of the woman: that is the spirit of Prophecy. So, if we remember that prophecy is something so far-reaching and all-inclusive, and bearing upon the Lord Jesus, I hope we are able to see something of Divine meaning as being more than verbal statement.

With that parenthesis, let us come to the first chapter of the Acts.

THE HOLY SPIRIT'S HIDDEN MEANING IN THE SCRIPTURES

"They therefore, when they were come together, asked him saying, Lord, dost thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (Acts 1:6).

We pointed out in a previous chapter how much the prophets were occupied with this matter of the Kingdom. These disciples of the Lord Jesus had their whole idea of the Kingdom from the prophets, and so their question is based upon a certain kind of mental apprehension of the teaching of the prophets. They had deduced certain things from what the prophets said, and they bring this question even at this late hour - "Dost thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel? And he said unto them, It is not for you to know times and seasons, which the Father hath set within his own authority. But ye shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit is come upon you: and ye shall be my witnesses both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea and Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth. And when he had said these things, as they were looking," - He restored the Kingdom, ascended His throne? No - "he was taken up; and a cloud received him out of their sight" (Acts 1:6-9).

Everything begins there in the way of spiritual understanding, because this statement of the Lord Jesus indicated that a new dispensation was being inaugurated which was different from that which the disciples had expected from the teaching of the prophets. This was the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, and they were going to discover that the Holy Spirit had meanings about the Old Testament prophecies which they had never imagined were there. Not until the Holy Spirit took hold of the Word of God did they know the prophets at all. And then we shall see that when He really took hold of the Scriptures and began to apply them and open them up and give the Divine meaning, things happened which not only were unexpected but were utterly contrary and opposed to the fixed mentality of the disciples, and which required a complete shattering of their mentality, the abandonment of established positions on their part. It is tremendously challenging if the Holy Spirit gets hold of the Word of God and then gets hold of us. There are going to be revolutionary changes in our whole outlook and procedure, and this book of the Acts is just full of that.

THE COMING OF THE SPIRIT - A NEW ORDER INTRODUCED

It is the dispensation, or stewardship, of the Holy Ghost. The words 'dispensation' and 'stewardship' mean an economy, an order; how things are done in this regime. We find that, in this dispensation, when the Holy Spirit came, He began to change things, because He was in charge. You may become a member of the staff of a business, and when you arrive you find things are done in such and such a way. Times are set and fixed like this; this is how things are done in this regime. And then a new Managing Director arrives, and he sees this prevailing order, and he registers at once that it is an imperfect system, that it is not producing the fullest results for which the business exists. He begins quietly but very strongly to take charge, and things begin to change, and the old set people who have been in that regime for years do not like these changes, and they begin to kick. They will not have it; they revolt and begin to fight against this new order. Some, who are more open-spirited, who are not so fixed and settled, begin to see his mind, his vision, and although they stumble on difficulties from time to time, and come up against the implications of this tremendous change - like Peter, over the visit to Cornelius (Acts 10) - and it wants just a little battle to get over the old prejudice, nevertheless, they have their battle, get over their difficulties, and fall into line, and so the great change takes place with wonderful results. Things begin to happen; the original purpose

of the business is now beginning, in a wonderful way, to be realised and fulfilled.

That is exactly what happened when the Holy Spirit came in on the day of Pentecost. There was an existing, fixed, established order, but it was not reaching God's end. It was not, as we say, 'delivering the goods'. The Holy Ghost came, with all the full knowledge of the Divine mind; He entered in and began His work of realising the real Divine concept; He took hold. So He divided the people. Some - these that dwelt in Jerusalem, and their rulers - would not have the new order. Well, all right - they lose it all. But others came into the fellowship of the Holy Ghost, "joined unto the Lord... one spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:17), with wonderful results.

A VITAL CONTRAST - THE LETTER AND THE SPIRIT OF SCRIPTURE

The point is: first of all, it is a new dispensation; and next, the Holy Ghost is in charge. His being in charge has to be recognised, with all that it means. And, being in charge, by His activities He reveals and evolves the very object of God from all eternity, and seeks to bring it out in this dispensation. As for the cleavage - well, it was an historic cleavage then, but it is a cleavage which spiritually has been going on all through the dispensation. It is a dividing between men of the letter and men of the spirit.

That movement, that tendency, toward a fixed position is constantly recurring, bringing that which is of God into imprisonment, within organized limitations which frustrate the whole counsel of God. I have an article before me - I wish I could quote it all; I cannot - but there are some things in it which express what is in my heart better than anything that I could say myself. It was written by a Member of the British Parliament.

'There are many classifications into which men and women may be divided - as upper, middle or lower class; rich, well-to-do and poor ; religious, sceptical and atheist; ... and so forth and so on. But, as I think, the only categorization which really matters is that which divides men as between the Servants of the Spirit and the Prisoners of the Organization. That classification, which cuts right across all other classifications, is indeed the fundamental one. The idea, the inspiration, originates in the internal world, the world of the Spirit... the idea having embodied itself in the organization, the organization then proceeds gradually to slay the idea which gave it birth. In the field of religion a prophet, an inspired man, will see a vision of truth. He expresses that vision as best he may in words. Upon what his disciples understand of the prophet's message, an organization, a church, will be built. The half-understood message will crystallize into a creed. Before long the principle concern of the church will be to sustain itself as an organization. To this end any departure from the creed must be controverted and, if necessary, suppressed as heresy. In a few score or a few hundred years what was conceived as a vehicle of a new and higher truth has become a prison for the souls of men. And men are murdering each other for the love of God.

'One moral to be drawn, it would not be wholly facetious to suggest, might be that the first rule for any organization should be a rule providing for its dissolution within a limited period of time... When we are members of an organization, as such, our attitude to it should be one of partial detachment. We must be above it even while we are in it. We should reckon on being in almost perpetual rebellion within it. Above all we should regard all loyalties to organization as tentative and provisional. We must be Servants of the Spirit, not Prisoners of the Organization. We must keep in touch with the sources of life, not lose ourselves in the temporary vehicles.'

'This world is a bridge. Ye shall pass over it, but ye shall build no houses upon it.'

Is that not just what you have in the Acts and all the way through - the crystallizing of our apprehension of truth, our interpretation, the partial perception, the statement in the letter, something fixed, embodying that which was of the Spirit of God in the beginning, but not allowing it to go beyond those bounds now? Anything more, anything other than that, is called heresy; this is the last word. It may be embodied in an organization, in what is called a church, a sect, a denomination, and if you go beyond that, well, you are said to be all wrong. The great difference between men of the organization and men of the Spirit is what you have here in the Book of the Acts.

THE LORDSHIP OF THE SPIRIT ESSENTIAL TO PROGRESS

The point is this: the fullness of Divine purpose demands that the Holy Spirit be continually in charge, that He be allowed to be completely in the place of government, and that we do not put anything in His place - nothing whatsoever; not a 'church', not a fixed order - so that at any point or in any way we could say, 'That is not what we teach, that is not what we have been brought up to believe, that is not what our church believes and teaches.' To do that is to put something in the way of the Holy Ghost. The Holy Ghost must be in charge and must be free. It was on those very points that the Apostles themselves had firstly their battles and then their enlargements. We shall see that as we go on. The full Divine purpose is going to take shape when the Holy Spirit is in charge with us.

And then there is something infinitely greater than times and seasons. Be careful about times and seasons; they have a wonderful and pernicious way of bringing you into limitations. Many people are dwelling in times and seasons. But they have done that all the way through the centuries. Let us watch, observe, take note; but be careful. Things have been happening, for example, in Palestine. We were told that the times of the Gentiles ended when General Allenby entered Jerusalem; that a new Caesar had arrived to reconstitute the Roman Empire when Mussolini set up his great empire in Rome! That sort of thing has been going on for centuries, and it is all based upon times and seasons.

The point is this - not that there are no times and seasons, not that there are not movements in the plan of God which have their particular characteristics and can be noted, but that there is something infinitely greater than that. It is the heavenly and not the earthly aspect that is in view in the Book of the Acts. That is why I stayed at that point - "When he had said these things... he was taken up". From that point it became a heavenly matter. Later the apostle Paul will use a phrase like this: "The Spirit searcheth all things, yea, the deep things of God" (I Corinthians 2:10). "The Spirit searcheth... the deep things of God": that is something transcendently greater than times and seasons; and if the Holy Spirit really is in charge, there is no fathoming what God has to reveal. "Things which eye saw not, and ear heard not, and which entered not into the heart of man." It is out there, into that vast realm, that the Holy Spirit would bring us, and we must be very careful that we do not clamp down on the Holy Spirit with man-made, man-constituted institutions. We must keep out in the open with the Spirit, and it is there that our surprises will begin - yes, and our very real discipline.

THE PROPHETS' ULTIMATE MEANING SPIRITUAL AND HEAVENLY

Those referred to in Acts 13:27, or those of whom they were typical, had a kind of apprehension of the Scriptures. There was no doubt at all about their devotion to the Word of God. They were fundamentalists of a rabid kind, as far as the inspiration of the Scriptures was concerned. They stickled for the Scriptures; they dotted all the 'i's and crossed all the 't's. Many among them were particular about the smallest detail in the realm of outward observances, even to the point of fussy fastidiousness. Because the law ordained

that a tithe of all the fruit of the land was the Lord's, they tithed meticulously even their mint and other herbs - but at the same time over-looked the things that were inward and which mattered much more to the Lord, such as judgment, mercy and faith (Matthew 23:23). That was their apprehension, their mentality, their position. They saw everything on the horizontal. It was a matter of the exact technique of Scripture.

What was the result? Well, they were perpetuating an earthly system with the Word of God. Their 'church' was the 'church of Israel', the 'Israelitish church' - and you can put in the place of Israel any other denominational title that you like. That church had its own particular forms, its vestments, its ritual, its liturgy, and all according to the Scriptures. It had its reading of the prophets every Sabbath. It had the whole system; but it was right down here on this earth and as dead as anything could be. It was purely formal; it was not getting through to God's end at all. Scriptural, in a sense, though it was, it was failing to realise the eternal counsels of God. When the Holy Ghost came, He did not sweep away the prophets, the Old Testament. He took them up and showed that there was something more - something more than all that earthly, perfect technique of the Word of God, with all its accompaniments - without which all that other would have to be set aside. And it is going to be set aside. It fails to reach God's end, therefore it passes out; and that is the issue of the Book of the Acts - the great transition. There is a Divine meaning back of all that, and when you have the Divine meaning, you can dispense with the other - it can go. If you have the thing in the really spiritual sense and realm, in the living and heavenly way, it does not matter about the other; that just drops out and falls away.

That is what happened in the Book of the Acts. You can hardly see the point at which it happened, but there is such a point. The Apostles did go on attending the temple and the synagogues for a little while, and then they ceased to do so. They were continuing for a time, but then it was as though they were steadily, quietly, moving out, and eventually they were out. Something had happened. They had come into the real thing and the initial thing had gone. The one led to the other, but it had served its purpose. They came into the heavenly good and meaning of it all; it was not a matter of technique now.

There are many who will say about the fixed orders and rituals: 'Of course, we do not regard this as everything; it is only symbolic. We do remember that it implies and points to something else, and it is that something else we are thinking of.' Yes, but is it not true that, when the Holy Ghost comes, as He came then, and gets possession, and you go on with Him, more and more the emphasis of the merely outward and earthly and temporal aspects of Christianity fade away, and you become increasingly occupied with the glory of the reality? The Jesus of history gives full place to the Jesus of the Spirit, of heaven. That is exactly what is meant by "the voices of the prophets".

So, on the day of Pentecost, you start with Joel. Everybody in Jerusalem was saying, "What meaneth this?" (Acts 2:12). They were all bewildered, without any understanding or perception; and Peter, with the eleven, stood up and said: "This is that which hath been spoken through the prophet Joel" (vs. 16). "This is that..." What a crushing blow it was to tradition, what an upheaval it created in Israel, this - with its implications of Jesus of Nazareth! And the Apostle went on, quoting freely from the Old Testament. He quoted David. That sermon of his on the day of Pentecost was just full of Old Testament quotations. But who ever saw that - who ever knew that that was the meaning of it!

You see the point. It is something that really needs to come to us with tremendous force, because even New Testament Christianity can be reduced again to an earthly system of exact technique. You can write your manuals on New Testament procedure. You can have it exactly according to the letter - but it is all on

the horizontal, it becomes legalistic, it ties up the Holy Ghost. Although the intention may have been to be more exactly according to Scripture, that the Lord might have a fuller way, it does not always result in that. The whole thing must be baptized in the Holy Ghost and lifted clean off the earthly level, becoming something entirely heavenly.

OUR RESPONSIBILITY TO YIELD TO THE SPIRIT

Now I think we can rightly say that, when the disciples asked, "Lord, dost thou at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?", they were seriously and genuinely exercised. The Scriptures must be fulfilled; what was written must happen. I think the disciples were very much occupied with this, burdened and perplexed; they wanted to know how things were going to work out. The Lord said, in effect: 'Do not worry about that. The Holy Ghost is coming and He will take all responsibility for everything - times and seasons and everything else. He is coming with the whole purpose of God in His hands, and He will work it out. You can be at rest - it is all right.' Those who get this earthly idea and conception of a system become terribly worried and burdened to work it out - burdened with the awful responsibility of this 'New Testament Church', of having things exactly as the Scriptures say! If the Holy Ghost were in charge, the burden would go. He is doing it. All that we are called upon to do is to get into the hands of the Holy Spirit, get completely free from all this harness, free to the Spirit of God. Matters will work out all right.

And even if the Holy Spirit comes up against some stones in us and for a time there is some conflict, He is more than equal to that situation. He is more than equal to Peter and his never having eaten anything unclean. When the Lord gave Peter that vision of the sheet let down with all manner of fourfooted beasts and creeping things and said, "Rise, Peter; kill and eat", Peter in effect quoted Scripture to the Lord; he quoted Leviticus 11, with its commandments concerning the unclean beasts which must not be eaten. 'Lord, here is Scripture for my position; my position is soundly founded upon the Word of God!' What are you going to do with that? Now, listen - I am not saying nor even implying that the Holy Ghost will ever call upon us to do something contrary to the Scriptures. He never will. But He will very often show us that the Scriptures mean something that we never saw them to mean. Leviticus 11 had a meaning that Peter had not seen. He had taken the letter and the literal meaning of those things. He never saw the Divine, spiritual meaning at the back of that. Cornelius had never received the Holy Spirit, and therefore an angel spoke to him. Peter had received the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, and it was the Spirit who was speaking to Peter. The Holy Ghost had this matter in hand, and was dealing with the difficulties in Peter, even in his fundamentalism, to lift him off a merely temporal, earthly ground to a heavenly. Peter was living under an open heaven; and there are tremendous changes when you get there. It does not all happen at once.

THE HOLY SPIRIT 'UPON' AND 'IN'

Just one further word for the present. You notice here that there was a double operation of the Holy Spirit. In chapter 2, the Spirit lighted 'upon' them. These cloven tongues as of fire sat upon them; and then it says, "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance." 'Upon' and 'in'. I do not want to be technical, contradicting what we have been saying about too much technique, but there is a meaning in the 'upon' and the 'in'. The coming 'upon' is the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit in relation to God's eternal purpose. That is, the Holy Spirit has come as the custodian and administrator of the eternal counsels of God, of the purpose of God from eternity, and, coming like that, He imposes (I trust that it is not the wrong word to use) the purpose of God upon the vessel. He gathers the vessel into the purpose in a sovereign way. It is as though He circled around and took charge of the vessel in an outward way and said, 'This is the vessel of the eternal purpose of God.'

He takes charge of it, comes 'upon' for that.

But then He entered 'in' also, and they were filled, and this had a further meaning. It meant this, that the inward life of the vessel must correspond to the outward purpose. That is tremendous. You see, the old dispensation was not like that, and this is the problem that the prophets were dealing with all the time. The outward form was there. Israel had their temple, they were offering their sacrifices, they were going through all the ritual, but their inward life was far from corresponding to that. God had to say, through the prophets, 'Away with your sacrifices - I do not want them!' (cf. Isaiah 1:10-14). The Lord Jesus took that up. "Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, but a body didst thou prepare for me; in whole burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin thou hadst no pleasure: then said I, Lo, I am come (in the roll of the book it is written of me) to do thy will, O God" (Hebrews 10:5-7).

Formalism never does the will of God; merely external system, however much it corresponds to the technique of the letter, never does the will of God; and the Holy Ghost was having none of that. He did not come in sovereignty to take up a lot of new people in a new dispensation, and give them forms and order, and make them do things in such and such a manner, merely in an outward way. He was going to have the inner life of the Church corresponding to the purpose. You find before long that He very severely comes upon anything that does not correspond. Ananias and Sapphira will know you cannot carry on in an outward way, pretending all is right. The Holy Ghost has seen inside the contradiction, and is not allowing it to pass.

Many want the coming 'upon' because they want to feel the power, feel themselves taken up, manipulated and moved. There has been a great deal of that sort of thing, which has not carried with it an inward correspondence. But the Lord's end can never be reached fully while there is any lack of true consistency between the purpose of God and the life of the people called to that purpose. "I... beseech you to walk worthily of the calling wherewith ye were called " (Ephesians 4:1). Oh, I do beg of you to have continuous dealings with God on this matter of the indwelling Spirit - not just for purposes of service, or power, but for purposes of life.

One of the tragedies of many Christians and many servants of God is this, that they can believe and give expression to things which are positively false, and propagate those things and do harm to other Christians by propagating them, and yet the Holy Ghost never seems to be able to make them aware that they are not telling the truth. I do not mean in Bible teaching, but in relation to other servants of God, and other work that God is doing. The solemn fact that there are such prejudices, suspicions, criticisms, misrepresentations, and so on, ought to drive us to the Lord with earnest appeal - 'Oh, Lord, it is no good my being engaged in Thy work, doing a lot of things for Thee, being prominent among men, perhaps, and well known for my Christian service, if yet, after all, the Holy Ghost cannot correct me within, put me right, give me a bad time when I say something not true. Save me from saying anything that does not correspond with the truth, or of which my inward life is a contradiction.' The Spirit within is to adjust us to the purpose of God. If we habitually, constantly, fall into ways which are not according to the Spirit, so that we become known for that kind of unpleasantness, we had better ask the Holy Spirit to do a deeper work in us. It is no use our having the deep things of God, while people know us as most difficult to get on with, always making life unpleasant for others. It will not do; it is a contradiction of the indwelling Spirit. He does not want us to have the system of things merely outwardly. We must have the inner life to correspond.

So we see that He came 'upon' to possess for the purpose of God, and He came 'within' to see that everything in the inner life corresponded to that purpose.

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