

The Criteria of Livingness - Growth

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes that true growth in the Christian life is characterized by spiritual reserves, organic relatedness, and the necessity of fellowship within the Church body.

Scripture: Isaiah 40:29, John 10:10

Topics: "Spiritual Growth", "Organic Fellowship"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of growth as a criterion of livingness, contrasting the spontaneous growth of a healthy organism with the stagnation that occurs when life is limited or frustrated. He explains that true spiritual growth requires a margin of spiritual capital, which is maintained through rest and the proper appropriation of spiritual nourishment. Sparks warns against the dangers of superficial growth and stresses the importance of organic relatedness within the body of Christ, where each member's function is vital for the health of the whole. He illustrates that just as the human body thrives on interdependence, so too must the Church embody this principle to fulfill its divine purpose. Ultimately, he calls for believers to cultivate a vibrant spiritual life that fosters genuine fellowship and growth.

Transcript

Having briefly touched upon the first evidence of life, that is: freshness or newness, we proceed to note the second, namely, growth. We have seen that the essential difference between the animate and the inanimate, a living thing or a rock - for instance - is that life produces an organism. The characteristic of an organism - when it is as it should be - is the capacity for growth. This growth is spontaneous, not forced, artificial, or engineered. We have said: 'when it is as it should be', because an organism can be a contradiction to its true nature, and fall short of its true life. But, given that it is a normal organism, it will spontaneously grow. For it to fail here means that somewhere and for some reason, life is arrested, frustrated, or limited.

While we do not want to seem too technical in dealing with spiritual matters, it must be kept in mind that God has constituted His created universe upon spiritual principles, and that, therefore, we can pass through nature to grace; the natural is meant to be a parable of the spiritual. So Jesus showed in His Parables; but it was only a small example of a vast truth. So, we let nature indicate and point to the greater and the Eternal. Perhaps the first law of the growth of a living organism is

A Margin of Capital Over Expenditure

When capital is overtaken by output in any realm, growth, expansion, development is at once threatened or arrested. That is particularly true in the physical realm. In business and commerce expansion may continue for a time on borrowed capital, 'overdrafts', but that is artificial, and its days are numbered. In the physical we may artificially boost and use stimulants, but true growth is not taking place.

In the spiritual a narrow margin of capital means that the seeming growth is a deception, a lie, the doom of which is in itself. No crisis will be survived without capital to draw upon. This is why God has ordained the ordinance of rest. This is the law of 'The Day of Rest', and this is why we have holidays. To violate this law is to overdraw on capital and shorten tenure and growth. So often in spiritual life and in the Lord's work a crisis cannot be met and overcome because there is lacking the spiritual reserves to carry through. A tragic story of breakdown in Christian work is bound up with this principle. It is essential to the growth of the Christian and spiritual organism, whether it be the individual Christian, the local company, or the Church universal, that it has life to spare and to give: that it has more than it needs for itself. When Jesus said: "I am come that they might have life, and have it more abundantly" surely He did not mean that they should just have exuberance, but abundance for others. In other words, that there should be capital for expansion.

But, having said what is so obvious, and yet so necessary (and ignore it at your peril), we have to ask how reserves and capital are maintained.

The Conserving of Capital

Here we do touch a matter of such vital significance as to determine whether there is such capital or whether it is only a false basis which will not stand up to the test. If it were asked what is necessary to build up strength, secure reserves of stamina, and assure growth, many people would answer that the essential is good food and plenty of it. To just say that may find you assenting and saying mentally: 'Quite right!' You may be a bit surprised if we say that your 'quite' needs qualifying, and that your answer could be wrong. Think again. Are you quite sure that the availability of good food in plenty will itself secure vitality and reserves of energy? Is there not required something in the organism to transform that food into energy? What about indigestion and its kind? Does this always mean that the food is not good? Or does it mean that the person cannot deal with it aright? No, food, however good and necessary, is not the full answer. The terrible and tragic fact is that with an abundant supply of good spiritual food, teaching, ministry, many Christians to whose very door it is brought do not grow thereby; they break down in crises; they never go beyond themselves; and are more a liability than responsible units in the body corporate. Again, nature can teach us.

In the human body there are certain functions which have solely to do with this question of how the body grows by laying up capital reserves.

The inclusive function is the capacity for taking hold of what is supplied and subjecting it to the purpose for which it is given. Medical people have a name for this, but we will omit technical terms. The point is that it is a recognized thing, and forms the basis of health. There just must be life in the organism sufficient to 'take hold' of food and make it yield its properties and values. Christians, the very best ministry that you can have is no guarantee that you will spiritually profit by it and grow unless you "have life in yourselves". There just has to be a correspondence between the life in the food and the life in yourself! There must be life laying hold on life and turning it to account. Otherwise you will be, as we have sadly found not a few Christians to be, where there is abundance of good food, over a long period of years, and you not "profit

thereby", but be a passenger, an attendant, and not "growing up into Him in all things", whose "profiteering is known unto all". You may, after all, be in a state of spiritual debility, dyspepsia, and a non-accountable member.

Within this general law there are two functions known to the physician, again with their own names. They are not so difficult as it may sound when mentioned.

(a) There is the function of breaking down the intake; the subjecting it to analysis, investigation, and extraction. That is exactly what happens in a healthy body. It is as though all the little cells lying in the lymph stream take an enquiring look at what is passed down their way, and they interrogate it: 'What sort of a thing are you? What do you want here? What have you got in you that we need? Let's have a look, let's break you down and find out how much good there is in you. Then we will use the good and refuse the useless.'

This examining, analysing, directing process is the normal function, where disease and injury do not obstruct or interfere. (Disease and injury in the spiritual life belong to another department from that with which we are occupied.)

In what way does this apply to the spiritual life?

It depends so much upon whether you are really spiritually alive; which means that, having been truly born again, you have received the Holy Spirit within. If this is so, and you are walking in the light with no controversy between the Lord and yourself, the Divine life in you will function as we have said above.

First, when spiritual food is presented to you, you will exercise yourself regarding it. You will look at it; investigate it; break it down into its components, and then appropriate by faith its values and seek to adjust to their demands. This is a bit different from hearing a message and either leaving it at that, or passing some remark as to whether it pleased you or not. It means that you will, at very least, say: 'Lord, what do you want me to learn by that; what do you mean for me by that word?'

(b) The second reaction is just the following through of the enquiry and analysis. It is appropriation, obedience, and acting according to the light. One is breaking down; the other is building up.

Thus, we return to the beginning. Life is the life of an organism. Life means that there is an energy, a quality of heart and mind which makes a definite response to what is presented; acts upon it; makes it yield its inherent properties. Apart from this life-action and reaction, the best provision will leave us anaemic, and incapable of surviving any serious crisis.

Thus and only thus shall we grow and have reserves of capital to meet not only our own demands but those of others. Our own growth is seen in others. Growth is horizoned by life. Growth is one of the criteria of livingness.

3. Organic Relatedness

The third mark of livingness which we shall consider is that of organic or corporate relatedness.

The inter-relatedness of the organisms is fundamental to the full expression of life; it is a fact which all living creation declares. The living creation is a vast system of inter-linked lives or functions. It is only through the fulfilment of corporate relations that life can continue and progress; only in this way can the

laws of life come to their fullest expression. Life involves relations. Isolation means death, where things are an end in themselves.

The very word 'Body' means a community. It comes from a word 'bhadh', to bind, a banding or binding together of mutually related parts. The parts can only fulfil their special function in relatedness. They can only reach their best in fellowship with other parts. Every organ of the body was made for fellowship. It is a fellowship which life itself creates and sustains. If we but knew it, the various faculties and cells of the physical body reach out and seek for fellowship, and there is a revolt in them against aloneness. Indeed, the body so reaches out because it knows that its safety depends upon co-operation and mutual aid. The individual function exists for the whole body, and the whole body is affected by the individual function. It is impossible to have dislocation without discontent, and it is impossible to have discontent without weakness and loss.

In a museum in London there is one of the first efforts at making a flying machine, the forerunner of the modern aeroplane. From a close study of birds taking off, in flight and alighting, and of the mechanism of a bird itself, a machine was made with wings made of feathers, a body with the contour of a bird, and mechanical action imitating wings, tail, 'under-carriage' and head. Although not resembling a bird, it was intended to be - in its shape and actions - a mechanical bird of sufficient size and strength to carry a man through the air. The creator of this contrivance had gone to nature, God's animate creation, for the laws and principles of flight. Would it not be a good thing if, instead of human organization, the Church - the people of God - looked carefully into the principles of interrelatedness as so marvellously functioning in that masterpiece of God, the human body? He has written there all the laws and principles of that unity for which there is such a vast amount of organized effort. As in all the faculties and cells of the human body there is the outreach and cry for fellowship, so in the Church universal, the true Body of Christ.

But there is a difference. Christian people are trying to bring it about from the outside. The human body does it by the life within. If "the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" had the full and clear way which an inward work of the Cross can secure, the problem of fellowship would be solved. Just as the erstwhile rivals, Peter and John (and other quarrelsome disciples), were - after the Cross - found in a wonderful spiritual partnership, not by pact but by the Spirit, so would it be if the same basis was inwardly established. The Church was, and is, intended to be universally - as an organism - what Christ's earthly human body expressed locally of the government of the Father. As in His case, so in the case of all who are controlled by Him, there is a will of God which outruns the limits of the individual personality, and is infinitely greater than the personal life. That will of God takes up the individual and treats him, not as an end in himself, but as a means to a large, Divine, immeasurable end.

No single life, however rich and many-sided, could provide an adequate field for the manifestation of the Divine purpose. That purpose requires myriads of personalities, with Divine qualities, in order that the length and breadth of its infinite scope may come to expression. The Apostle prayed that the saints might be strengthened with might by the Holy Spirit to comprehend with all saints the breadth, length, depth, and height. The comprehension demands "all saints". In the human body, if an organism gets out of the controlling relationship with the other organisms, one of two things happens. It either becomes subnormal, less than its real nature and purpose, and in that way becomes unbalanced; or it becomes abnormal, and in so doing loses its distinguishing character. Cancer is like that. Because of the loss of the control of associated tissues it makes the organism abnormal, and that organism in time cannot be recognized as to what it normally is.

What a lot of history as to Christian lives and Christian activity is illustrated by these so well-known physical facts. What a warning they are! Fellowship, relatedness, co-ordination, are determined by the measure of spiritual life. When that spiritual life is at low ebb fellowship is strained and divisions abound. People throw off restraint and authority and act independently. When spiritual life is full and high, there is a flowing, holding, and moving together. Just after Pentecost, when life was at high tide, it says of the believers: "They continued in fellowship". All this is not only a statement of truth, it is a test of the spiritual livingness.

Of the criteria of livingness, therefore, organic relatedness in expression is a vital factor. The true expression of the Body of Christ is horizoned by life.

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