

The Divine Reaction

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the need for spiritual revival in the Church and the importance of spiritual men to recover the power of testimony in the world.

Scripture: Ezekiel 12:6, 1 Timothy 3:15, 1 Timothy 4:12, 1 Timothy 6:20, 2 Timothy 2:1-3

Topics: "Spiritual Integrity", "Leadership in Crisis"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the crisis faced by the early church as Paul prepares to depart, leaving Timothy and others to uphold the truth amidst moral laxity and spiritual decline. He warns against the dangers of formalism and the need for spiritual integrity in leadership, highlighting Timothy as a symbol of God's reaction to these challenges. Sparks stresses that true spirituality is rooted in weakness and dependence on God's grace, urging believers to maintain their spiritual measure in the face of adversity. He calls for a return to the essence of spiritual life, where authority and knowledge are derived from genuine spiritual character rather than official titles. Ultimately, the sermon serves as a reminder that God's men and women must honor Him above all else to preserve the purity of His testimony.

Transcript

Let us consider a little further some of the indications of the existence of a real crisis at the time when Paul wrote these letters to Timothy. We have noted the first feature of that crisis in the imminent departure and withdrawal of Paul himself from the scene. Undoubtedly the Apostle was writing largely for that very reason. The things he was saying to Timothy were said largely because he was going. These things needed saying, because the responsibility was going to be left to others, and to Timothy in a particular way. It constituted a very big change that Timothy and the faithful men mentioned by the Apostle (2 Tim. 2:2) were to take up the work and the responsibility, to stand in the place that Paul had occupied. And so the Apostle was laying the burden very heavily upon Timothy and these others, because of his near-at-hand departure.

Then we took note of that secession from himself, to which he refers. All those who were in Asia had turned from him; they were no longer prepared to follow Paul, no longer standing with him in the truth and purpose for which he had given his life, no longer faithful to the great revelation which God had given him. Perhaps they did not have an adequate apprehension of how great a thing it was that had come through Paul. For it is difficult to believe that anyone who had a real apprehension of the greatness of those things could turn away like this. However, be that as it may, they were leaving Paul, which meant that they were

leaving what Paul had sought to realise.

Peril of Moral Laxity

Furthermore, we began to note the change toward a real state of spiritual depreciation, indicated by the content of these two letters. I will not turn you to every fragment and every passage indicative of these things, but it does not take very long to read these letters, and I would suggest that, after having had it pointed out, you take them up anew and read them carefully. Read them again and again. The Apostle refers to some things that are worse than sad or grievous - they are quite evil. There are things creeping in and having a place amongst Christians, such as moral laxity - carelessness in moral conduct and relationships; truly a sign of a lowering of spiritual temper, temperature, standard. The beginnings of it, so far as the Church, so far as Christianity was concerned, are traceable in these letters. The Apostle is saying, in effect: 'These two things cannot go together: spirituality - a real, true spiritual life - and moral laxity.'

Perhaps you think that that is a terrible subject even to mention. I do not know whether that is so, but the world is a terrible place, a terrible place, morally, and we all have to live here. The atmosphere is full of it, the papers are full of it, and it is not always easy to keep that atmosphere, if not that kind of life, altogether at bay. It insinuates itself, and it is a very, very persistent means employed by the Devil to ruin the spiritual life. The enemy will not scruple to catch the people of God on the line of moral laxity, and if he can do that, he has ruined their testimony.

You remember that we began our last chapter by referring to the Tabernacle as the shrine of the testimony of God, and to God's recognition of the need to reinforce the corners, the turning-points - that is, to reinforce spirituality against the perils and dangers of a corner, a change-round from one line to another. You see, it is the TESTIMONY that is involved. And let me say this: that, far from being the least involved, or the most immune, Christian people are more in danger of this very thing than anyone else. If the enemy can get a Christian on that low level of life, at that point, he has struck a masterblow. If he can get a servant of God overcome there, he has surely consolidated his ground against the testimony of Jesus. Therein is a long and terrible history; it explains much. Hence - 'Timothy, Timothy, "flee youthful lusts" (2 Tim. 2:22): beware of the encroachment and inroads of this moral laxity that is in the world - flee from it.' Is that an unnecessary word? Forgive me, if you think so. But we have got to reinforce against anything like that for the testimony's sake.

Becoming Behaviour and Apparel in the House of God

But that is not the whole of it. I must say here some things that I would rather not say, and if they do not apply to you personally, your enlightenment and being made aware may be helpful to some others in danger. For another feature of the change and the lowering level of spirituality marked in this letter is unbecoming behaviour in the House of God. The House of God is mentioned, as you notice here, and one of Paul's emphatic words here is "how men ought to behave themselves in the house of God" (1 Tim. 3:15); that is why he wrote this. There is such a thing as unbecoming behaviour. And he touches upon the women - the women with unbecoming dress, or lack of becoming dress. Now that is not something that we like to mention but should it not be mentioned? It is a mark of poor spiritual life, of a low spiritual level, when that happens; these things are a barometer of spiritual life. For spirituality is pre-eminently practical. When we speak of 'spiritual' things and 'spirituality', people sometimes make a joke of it and say, 'Oh, they are so spiritual!' Well, if you can think or talk like that, you have not any idea of what spirituality is.

Spirituality is tremendously practical: it touches your dress, it touches your behaviour, it touches your conduct as a Christian! Spirituality says, 'You will not overdo it and you will not underdo it; you will have a proper, dignified behaviour'. That is what is here.

But is it not a pity that these things which Paul wrote, concerning women, sisters, for instance, have been taken out and made subjects in themselves, so that Paul has been reproached that he ever said such things? That is complete mishandling. Why not recognise that this is set in a decline of Christianity, and that these things are marks of spiritual decline? That is why they have to be spoken about; they are not things in themselves. Naturally, you may have your feelings about them. You might, for instance, be called old-fashioned, not up-to-date; you have not moved with the times. But if you are spiritual, you will have another kind of argument. You will not be behind the times, and you will not be moving with the times: you will be moving with Heaven, and that is a different standard altogether.

Beginnings of Formalism, Institutionalism, Ecclesiasticism, in the Church

Let us note other indications in these letters. On the outside there was the beginning of an altogether new situation with Christianity itself. We here have quite clearly indicated the beginning of ecclesiasticism, clericalism, formalism, officialdom in Christian orders. It is all here, it has started. Paul died, Paul was executed, and there was a period of some twenty-five years without any historical record of what was happening. Then we come to the writings of John, followed by silence again. And then men began to write, and we have the writings of men called the Fathers. What do we find? Immediately they begin to write, at the end of the first Christian century, we find that clericalism is in full force and so is ecclesiasticism. The whole principle of spiritual men as overseers has been resolved into a system of prelates, bishops, and what not - a non-New Testament system. This is officialdom: men in high position ecclesiastically, governing in an official way. It has come; here are the beginnings. That which was spiritual - spiritual men, men of God, functioning as overseers of the Church and of the churches, because they were spiritual men - has now given place to men who are officials, ecclesiastics, clerics, and so on. A tremendous change has taken place, and it has come right down through all the Church's history.

The Christian ordinances were changed and the Christian doctrines were changed. The ordinance of baptism, for instance, was changed at the end of the first century. I am not going to enlarge upon these things; I am taking them as indications of a change - the turning of a corner - the coming in now of something organized in the place of that which was organic, of something institutional in the place of that which was spiritual. It is the movement away from what was spontaneous. And how spontaneous it was! In the early days the Church was just springing up and pressing on and expanding and growing by the sheer life that was in it; now it is organized, now it is a self-conscious entity, making its own appointments, and so on. The change led to infinite loss of power, and all the unhappy conditions that we have today.

Responsible Men in the Church Must Be Spiritual Men

Now, the point is that the Holy Spirit saw this encroachment, saw this thing beginning, and sought to react to it. Through Paul He wrote these letters, pointing out that elders and overseers in the Church must be essentially spiritual men: they must be known for their spiritual life and measure, as well as for their moral character; and everything in the House of God must be spiritual in its nature and value, not official. The Lord's word, then, now and ever, is: If you want to recover the power of testimony in this world, recover spirituality! If you want to have that impact and registration which was known at the beginning you must recover the spiritual state which existed at the beginning. Everything must be like THAT, not like this. A

man's position in the House of God depends, where God is concerned, on his spiritual value and nothing more. You may dress him up and decorate him and 'lord' him, and call him by this name or that, but with God it is no more than that man's spiritual value that counts.

And what is true in the realm of those in positions of responsibility is true of everyone. Paul calls Timothy a "man of God"; indeed, he makes it personal, and says, "O man of God..." That is because of Timothy's particular position of responsibility; but, mark you, Paul uses that phrase of all others too, in the same writing. Why are the Scriptures given and to whom are they given? Are they only given to Timothy and to overseers and to men in particular responsibility? Not at all. "Every scripture inspired of God is... profitable for" this and that, "that the man of God..." (2 Tim. 3:16,17). Who is that? Every one to whom the Scripture is given is called a "man of God". So, if you have the Scriptures, you come into that category, under that designation; you are supposed to be a man of God, a woman of God. We are all supposed to be 'God's men'. What are God's men, the men of God? Again, that title belongs only to those who are in a spiritual position, not in any formal, official position. They are where they are because of their spiritual life, measure and value. We cannot underline that too strongly.

We thus see something of the crisis involved in this change from what was inward to everything being outward - offices and functions and positions and titles - the introduction of formalism. Paul is bringing it back to where it ought to be - to the person himself, the person herself. That is where he fastens it. In order to recover, and to safeguard, and to protect, responsibility must be in the hands of spiritual men and women.

John's Writings: A Renewed Recall to Spirituality

These are indications of the course of things, of the change that was coming over Christianity, and, as I said earlier, there is so much proof of this. Paul went, but somewhere John was going on. You know that Paul went in the terrific holocaust of persecution that led to John's exile. John is somewhere - and then he writes his Gospel, the Gospel of pre-eminent spirituality. You do not need that I should stay to show that the Gospel written by John was written with the object of bringing things back to spiritual principles. And then he wrote his letters: and John's letters are just full, from beginning to end, of spiritual essentials - life, light, love, and so on. And when you come to his Revelation, and read those chapters containing the Lord's challenge to the churches in Asia - Paul's churches - what do you find? Full development of those things of which we have been speaking! Moral laxity: "thou sufferest the woman Jezebel"; formalism, empty show: "thou hast a name that thou livest, and thou art dead"; and so on. The thing has come about.

But, again, what is the Lord's reaction? It is a reaction to a spiritual position. What are 'overcomers'? Overcomers are simply those who have maintained or recovered spiritual ground. It is not easy, in a world like this, in the present course of things, in Christianity as it has become, to recover or to maintain purely spiritual ground. You will suffer for it, so the Lord said. I venture to say that it is far more difficult to keep a clear, straight spiritual course in the Christian life, than it is to live just as a Christian in this world. To live as a Christian in the world may be difficult, but you will find that there are difficulties in Christianity which you will never encounter from the world. Am I right? Yes, "a man's foes shall be they of his own household" has a very much larger meaning. A spiritual course in Christianity is exceedingly difficult - because of Christians. Christianity has become very largely the enemy of spirituality.

These are strong things to say, but, you see, it is a matter of the effectiveness of testimony, the purity of testimony. I am not at the moment touching upon the doctrinal side of things. A large part of these letters is

given up to departure from former doctrine, and I may come to that in some measure later on. What I am concerned with just now is to demonstrate two things: firstly, that this kind of crisis happens, it is the kind of thing that happens again and again, it is a besetting peril all along the line, to drop from the full, high, spiritual level to which the Lord has called, away to something lower and something less; and then, secondly, that God has ever and always reacted, and still does react by trying to get His people on to a more spiritual level of things, to increase their spiritual measure, their spiritual life. It is the only way to overcome, it is the only way to get through and (to come to the letters again) to be able at the end to hand back the deposit to the Lord unspoilt. "O Timothy, guard that which is committed unto thee" (1 Tim. 6:20). 'Guard the deposit! Hand it back at the end, unsullied, unspoilt, undiminished, intact!' Paul, on that very matter, says: "I have finished the course, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7) - 'Timothy, take it up and do the same.' That is the effect of it. "Guard that which is committed unto thee" - the deposit of God.

Timothy an Instrument of the Divine Reaction

Now let us come to the Divine reaction more particularly and specifically. I would ask you to take note of this. Timothy himself is at this point being marked out as the instrument of the Divine reaction to the existing trend of things. And Timothy therefore assumes the role of a SIGN. Now, that is not a new idea in the Bible, is it? Ezekiel was told by the Lord that He had made him a sign for the house of Israel (Ezek. 12:6,11; 24:24,27). And Timothy comes into that position or function, as a sign: he must himself be indicative of what spiritual features are, what spirituality is. Let us then look at Timothy - first of all, shall we say, negatively - remembering that he is himself a symbol of things essential to recovery. We are going to find much comfort and help here, all of us. What are these things?

First of all, weakness. You can despise Timothy, if you like; they did that when he was alive. Paul said to him: "Let no man despise thy youth" (1 Tim. 4:12). Naturally, he was despised, and in weakness. Then, dependence. It looked as though Paul was providing him with a set of crutches to help him to keep on his feet! So much of what Paul wrote to Timothy indicated these things about him. Speaking of Timothy naturally, you might say that he was evidently a very timid, nervous sort of young man, who needed all the time to be bucked up. Surely, Timothy must have been very weak, seeing all these things were necessary!

Weakness and Dependence the Ground for Spirituality

Look at it that way, if you like; but there are other ways of looking at it. This is the most suitable and promising ground for spirituality - indeed, it is absolutely essential to the thing that God is after and Paul was after! What shall we say about Timothy? Paul thought a very great deal of him; Paul, who did not usually err in the matter of wisdom and discretion, put Timothy into a very, very important place. Timothy was an apostle, although he was never called that. Timothy was an elder, although he was never called that. But Timothy was more. There was in Timothy a combination of all the functions from an evangelist to a church-builder. "Do the work of an evangelist". He was THE elder amongst the elders of the church at Ephesus - no small responsibility! Think of Ephesus. What was Paul thinking of, sending someone like Timothy to put things right at Ephesus, to take charge in Ephesus, to correct and to build in Ephesus? Preposterous to send a young fellow like that, of this kind!

Well, spiritual and natural abilities are in altogether different worlds! And when God reacts to recover, or acts to provide against a threat, a peril, a danger that has the characteristics we have noted, He brings His instrument down to nothingness - He empties it out and makes it more conscious of its weakness and of its dependence than of anything else. In this greatest of all works of God - the maintaining of His testimony

in absolute purity and truth - there is no place whatever, amongst those who are involved, for assumption: for assuming that they are something, or assuming that they can do something, or assuming that they are called to this or that. There is no place, either, for presumption - that is, running ahead of God, running ahead of the Spirit. There is no place for self-importance, for self-sufficiency, for self-assertiveness - no place for any of these things. If you and I are going to be used for spiritual purposes, God will take us in hand to drain us of the last drop of anything like that, until we know that of all men we are the most unfit and unsuited to the thing to which God has called us; that from all natural standpoints we have no right to be in that position at all. That is God's way of making spiritual men and women.

Strength Through Grace

Now, if you are acute in your mental activity, you may have thought you are catching me out on this, because in these letters Paul is telling Timothy he must be strong, and I have just said he must be weak! Paul is as good as telling him he must be full, and I have said he must be empty! Ah, yes, but if Timothy was to be all that Paul said he must be, then it would all be spiritual and not natural. Is that borne out by the context? Of course it is! "Be strong" - but it does not stop there. "Be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 2:1). That is not self-strength, that is not natural strength of any kind. "The grace that is in Christ Jesus" - be strong in that. So we see what is the strength in the case of Timothy, as the symbol of God's reactionary method and means in a day of declension. The strength is to be spiritual strength.

That works both ways. It is a word of encouragement to those who are conscious of no strength, who only feel their weakness; as though to say: 'Look here, that is not the criterion, how weak you feel, at all: the criterion is "the grace that is in Christ Jesus".' And it works the other way. If any of us should feel that we can do it, and press into the situation or into the position, and take it on, assuming or presuming, then we are in for a bad time under the hand of God - that is, if we are going to be of any use to the Lord. Any such attitude is going to be emptied out.

All Functions to be Spiritual, Not Natural or Official

"Let no man despise thy youth". Well, then, what is to be the reaction of Timothy when he finds men despising him? Suppose you are a young man: how would you react if you were in his place, and I said: 'Don't you let them despise you! Don't you let them have that attitude toward you!?' What would you do? You could act very much in the flesh, couldn't you? You could begin, as they say in America, to be 'chesty' - peacockish, they mean - and spoil it all by a false dignity, by an artificial personality that is not yourself. Authority in the House of God is spiritual. There is authority about a man or woman who has real spiritual measure, that weighs, that counts, and has influence. They may naturally be despised, but let spiritual measure be found with them, and you will find that in times of difficulty they are the ones to whom people turn. We may touch again upon spiritual authority later.

The knowledge and the understanding are to be spiritual. The office, if you like to use that word, whether it be of elder, overseer, teacher, evangelist, or whatever it is, is to be spiritual, not official. You do that because you are that. It simply comes out because that is how you are spiritually constituted - it is how the Holy Spirit has constituted you. And it is a poor thing to try to be an evangelist, or a teacher, if the Holy Spirit has not constituted you one. Oh, what tragedies we have seen, through people trying to be teachers, or whatever it may be, because they like it, it appeals to them, and the Holy Ghost has not qualified them for it. It is just like the peacock's tail - when it has gone! Still strutting about, but there is nothing behind it! Is there anything more pathetic? What is the good of it all, if it is not of the Holy Ghost?

Endurance Only Possible Through Spiritual Measure

"Endure hardness" - hardship - "as a good soldier" (2 Tim. 2:3, A.V.). Endure. just think for a moment what Timothy was called upon to endure at that time. You perhaps have not any idea of the situation. I have re-read lately the account of those persecutions of the Christians which came about through Nero, and through the Jews - the unspeakable horrors of cruelty to men, to women, to children, to families. I should shock you if I mentioned the inhuman, indescribable atrocities that literally hundreds of thousands of Christians suffered at the hands of those Roman Emperors. When Nero commanded the burning of Rome, a scapegoat had to be found upon whom the blame could be laid, and it was laid upon the Jews: and the Jews said No, it was the Christians; and so the Christians were taken. You are not surprised at the sufferings of the Jews, are you? Not only Christ, but hundreds of thousands of His precious children were tortured in unspeakable agony, for many decades.

Timothy was in the presence of that growing shadow. He knew that his father in Christ was in prison and shortly to suffer death. He knew that those who had been near Paul in Rome had left him. And Paul said: "At my first defence no one took my part, but all forsook me" (2 Tim. 4:16). Timothy was in the presence of that! Endurance! Who COULD endure but by the mighty power of the Spirit? You want spiritual measure for that, you need the enduring power of Christ for that; that is spiritual endurance, not just natural courage.

We see, then, that, at all times of peril to His Church, at all times of danger, when things are threatening, and a change seems to be coming about, the Lord, in the first place, always tries to get His people on to higher spiritual ground: He always seeks to increase spiritual measure, to bring things over from the merely professional and formal on to the ground of spiritual life and spiritual character. And, secondly, He seeks to remind us that we are 'GOD'S MEN': we are not the men of a system, not men of the world, not men of our own natural ambitions - we are God's men. It is significant, is it not, that Timothy's name (Timo-theos) means 'honouring God'. That is the key to everything, as with him, so with us; that is spirituality.

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