

The Great Transition (Continued)

by T. Austin-Sparks

The great transition in the early Christian church was the passing of government from earth to heaven, with the seat of government in the hands of the ascended Christ, and it brought about a radical change from earthly to heavenly support.

Scripture: Acts 1:8, Acts 7:54

Topics: "Reliance on the Holy Spirit", "Transition in Faith"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks discusses the significant transition in the early church following Christ's resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit, emphasizing the shift of authority from earthly governance to the ascended Christ. He notes that the apostles were initially slow to recognize the implications of these changes, often clinging to Jerusalem and its traditions, while the church was meant to operate independently of localities and material symbols. The martyrdom of Stephen marked a pivotal moment, leading to a broader understanding of the church's mission and the necessity of relying on the Holy Spirit for guidance. Sparks highlights that this transition involved a radical change in how believers were to live, relying on spiritual rather than material support, and that true faith often comes with testing and trials. Ultimately, he calls for a return to a faith that seeks God's glory and guidance above all else.

Transcript

That all the elements of a great transition were present in those first years following the resurrection and ascension of the Lord and the advent of the Holy Spirit, is unmistakable.

Although those immediately concerned and in responsibility were not fully awake to the meaning of what was happening and were slow to grasp the implication of things, there is no doubt that they were conscious of being precipitated into waters strange, deep and unaccustomed. Strange things were happening, and the cumulative meaning only slowly broke upon them. True, there were ACTS of divine Sovereignty which could not be ignored, but their inclusive meaning only GREW upon them. For instance, the death of Stephen was an event, but what Stephen and his death implied only a very few seem to have recognized at the time. It took the "apprehending" of Paul by Christ, and the full purpose of his election to explain Stephen.

"The persecution which arose about Stephen" was under the sovereign government of heaven, but it seems to have been looked upon only in that light and not as a part of a DISPENSATIONAL plan. This, with the crisis event of Peter and Cornelius, was not seen to be related to heaven's intervention to change

the base of operations, and the "headquarters" from earth to heaven. There was a clinging to Jerusalem.

Dr. Campbell Morgan has a fine paragraph on this in his "Acts of the apostles". It reads thus:

"The martyrdom of Stephen created a crisis in the history of the church. In reading the Acts, we find that from this point onward (chapter eight) Jerusalem is no longer the centre of interest. It almost fades from the page. This is not loss, but great gain. When Jerusalem ceases to be the centre of interest, the record does not suffer in any way, nor does it reflect upon Jerusalem. THE LOCAL, THE TEMPORAL, THE MATERIAL, ARE OF LITTLE IMPORTANCE IN THE CHURCH OF GOD. THE UNIVERSAL, THE ETERNAL, THE SPIRITUAL ARE SUPREME. It was of the very spirit of an old and past economy to fasten upon a geographical centre, and to depend upon material symbols. The church now moves out upon the great pathway of her victorious business, independent of Jerusalem. THAT IS THE SUPREME REVELATION OF THE BOOK OF THE ACTS OF THE APOSTLES. Not easily did they learn the lesson, for the apostles clung to Jerusalem; but the great spiritual movement, independent of Jerusalem, and the apostles, went forward, not slighting Jerusalem, nor unmindful of Jerusalem, nor careless of its past history and early contribution, but far more influenced by the vision of Jerusalem from on high, the mother of us all... NO LONGER HAMPERED BY LOCALITIES AND TEMPORALITIES, THE SURGING SPIRITUAL LIFE OF THE CHURCH SWEEPED THEM ALL AWAY... Church failure has invariably resulted from an attempt to check that spiritual movement which is independent of locality, and of all things material. Whenever the church is governed from Jerusalem, or from Rome, or from anywhere else other than heaven, it is hindered and hampered and prevented from fulfilling the great functions of its life." (Italics [emphasis] are ours.)

We have said that there was a slowness at the beginning to recognize the meaning of heavenly trends. This was probably due to two things. Firstly, when we are close up to events and happenings we only see them in themselves: the element of perspective and relatedness is obscured or blurred. The things themselves are all we see. We, in later times, are able to see how the steps and incidents fitted into a divine pattern. Or, are we so able? Perhaps inability to so discern is the reason for so much confusion when the pattern is before us.

Then, secondly, they were thus slow because GOD'S WAY OF TEACHING IS MORE BY EXPERIENCE THAN BY THEORY. Often they only drew their conclusions from accomplished facts and not from reasoned theories. God did something and explained it afterwards. This is something which should be helpful to us all in events which, at the time, are "out of our depth". Heaven has the meaning and what is not explained now will subsequently be made clear.

What then was the great transition?

It was the passing of all government, with the seat of government, from earth to heaven; from the hands of man to the hands of the ascended Christ. Henceforth all reference and deference was to the exalted Son of God. Henceforth man was an instrument, a vehicle, a recipient. Man was not an originator, a projector, a source, a deviser, a planner, a master. He had to GET everything, be absolutely subject.

There is a very indefinite and nebulous belief in the sovereignty of God. It is a kind of fatalistic generalization which takes everything into its own hands, and "trusts God that it will turn out all right".

This is not as it was in the beginning. Prayer was made regarding every question and not until it could be said with assurance: "It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us", or "The Holy Spirit said..." would they

move. Those are things which it is most rare for the church to say in our time. The custodianship of the Holy Spirit regarding the world-mission of the church, local and universal, was not taken for granted or assumed, but specific and definite reference was made to Him.

But, when we have pointed to the fact and general nature of the great transition, we are obliged to say something as to the great difficulty in which it involved the new dispensation. This probably was a further reason why, on the one hand, the change was so slow in being made or entered into and, on the other hand, why the Lord did not impose it on them all at once. He seems to have nursed them into it, with certain crisis precipitations. The change was so radical! The new position was indeed all so new. By way of illustration consider Israel in the wilderness. Under heavy testing, they may later have given to Egypt an illusory and sublimated adornment, when they hankered for "the fleshpots of Egypt", for the garlic and the onions, but still there WERE fleshpots! They took their "kneading-troughs", so there must have been dough to knead, and the frequent reference to leaven indicates tasty bread. Crushed, oppressed, and in bondage as they had been in Egypt, their support was tangible and sure. The wilderness was a new position and an extremely testing one. Life was placed upon a supernatural basis in all temporal matters. If this was true of an earthly Israel, how much more so of the heavenly!

In this new dispensation all our spiritual blessings are in heavenly places. Our city and citizenship are in heaven. Our Priest, altar, and sacrifice are in heaven. Our calling is a heavenly calling. Our entire spiritual support has to come from heaven; and so much more. Only those who are wholly committed to God know how testing this life of faith is. And yet, and yet, what a miracle it is that we go on and not under, even after many years of trials and sufferings! Our place is by no means an easy one. It is so contrary to the life of nature and the flesh! But it is carried on by the power of his resurrection.

We may add that the further we go on with the Lord -- not in time merely, but in depth -- the more testing our position becomes. It is impossible to take a position with God without having that position severely and perhaps repeatedly tested. It might be thought that to move with God will carry with it His defences against serious trials and adversity. In fact it works the other way, but He keeps and is faithful. Justification will be found in spiritual, heavenly and eternal values. Because many have not had the spiritual measure to stand up to a position MENTALLY, DOCTRINALLY OR OBJECTIVELY taken, they have reverted to an easier, and what they call a "simpler" or more "practical" way, and this explains so much weakness among Christians in our time.

Undoubtedly the Spirit of God is pressing many Christians up into reality. This is true, even amidst much activity to popularize Christianity and to eliminate the hard way of the Cross. It may be necessary for some hard blows to be struck at traditional fixity, but this would only make the end of the age correspond to the beginning, both in the Spirit's method and His object. Systems will have to collapse in order that the Person shall be all in all.

When we have said this we have touched one point at which things radically differ in organized Christianity from what they were at the beginning. The organized so often takes away the opportunity of proving God and letting HIM get ALL the glory.

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