

The Need - God-Given Vision

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the vital necessity of God-given vision for the initiation, continuance, and consummation of the Christian life and service.

Scripture: 1 Samuel 3:1, Proverbs 29:18, Zechariah 4:1-2, Acts 26:16-19, Romans 1:1-3

Topics: "Spiritual Revelation", "God-Given Vision"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the critical need for God-given vision among believers, asserting that true Christian life and service are rooted in divine revelation. He explains that vision encompasses both the act of seeing and the capacity to perceive what God presents, which is essential for the initiation, continuance, and consummation of spiritual life. Sparks illustrates how vision empowers believers for service, unifies the church, and sustains them through trials, highlighting that without vision, people disintegrate and lose their way. He calls for prayer for a fresh revelation of Christ to bind the church together and to empower believers to fulfill their God-given purposes.

Transcript

Proverbs 29:18; 1 Sam. 3:1; Zech. 4:1-2; Acts 26:16-19; Rom. 1:1-3.

Were I asked what I considered to be a need which embraces the greatest number of vital issues amongst the Lord's people, I should sum it up in one word, "vision," vision God-given. If you reflect for a few moments you will see that the Bible is almost entirely a matter of vision, that the whole of the New Testament Christianity is a matter of vision, that all Christian life and service which is that in truth is a matter of vision.

Vision, of course, has two parts. It means something seen, and it also means a capacity for seeing; something presented to be seen, and the power of seeing that which is presented. That is vision. There may be a vision in the first sense which is not seen, a presentation not discerned. It would be very difficult indeed to estimate the value and the importance of vision Divinely given.

In the New Testament another word is used for vision. It is the word "revelation." That is a very comprehensive word. No matter at what point we touch the New Testament Christian life we touch vision or revelation.

The Initiation of the Spiritual Life

The initiation, or the initiatory stage, of the Christian life in the New Testament is seen to be a matter of revelation or vision. It is a presentation to the heart and a heart apprehension of the Lord Jesus, and unless that is the nature of the beginning of the Christian life there is something essential and vital lacking. Any Christian life which is simply a matter of giving a mental assent to certain propositions of Christian truth, and the writing down of the name, for instance, upon a slip of paper, saying that you become a Christian, lacks something which is essential to make that Christian life a mighty force. In the New Testament the beginnings of the Christian life are a revelation of Christ to the heart, and a heart apprehension of Him. It is a matter of inward spiritual vision. It may be of a very elementary character; it may be very imperfect so far as the fulness of Christ is concerned; but it is sufficient for its immediate purpose, and it is tremendously real to those who have it; to those who are able to say in any form of words: I have come to see the Lord Jesus as my Saviour! When that can be said in reality it represents vision, if it is the vision of the heart. When you touch the beginnings of Christian life in the New Testament you are touching vision.

The Continuance of the Spiritual Life

When you touch the continuance of Christian life in the New Testament you are touching vision. The continuance of Christian life is the development, the increase, the progress, which means the greater fulnesses of Christ; and whenever you touch some fuller meaning of Christ in the New Testament, whenever you come to some progress, some movement, some advance, some development, some increase, you will always find it is by fresh vision or revelation. It is a further unveiling, a fuller revelation. It is a new heart apprehension of something presented, and something seen by the enablement of the Holy Spirit. It is so different from merely an intellectual grasp of Christian doctrine, which may fall altogether short of that dynamic power of enlarging the spiritual life. True progress as we find it in the New Testament is on the basis of a fresh revelation, a fuller revelation, a new vision. So that the true, living believer marks his or her progress by being able to say, as at the beginning, I have come to see the Lord in a new way, in a fuller way; and that with the eyes of the heart being enlightened.

The Consummation of the Spiritual Life

What is true of the initiation and the continuation is true of the consummation of the spiritual life. If you touch the consummation of the spiritual life in the New Testament you find it has to do with an unveiling of Jesus Christ. What is the consummation of the spiritual life? It is His appearing, and with His appearing there is closely and inseparably linked the completing of our spiritual progress. "Behold what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the children of God." That is the initiation. "It doth not yet appear what we shall be, but when he shall be manifested we also shall be manifested with him... we shall be like him for we shall see him as he is." That is the consummation of the spiritual life. We shall be like Him because we shall see Him. There is a marvellous changing power in seeing the Lord from the beginning to the end.

Vision Needed for Service

The same thing holds good in service. Touch service in the New Testament, and you find that is bound up inseparably with vision. If the Apostle Paul is an inclusive representation of the true spiritual service, it is patent that the basis of it all with him was vision. He says: "I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision." He was constituted a minister and a witness because the Lord appeared unto him. He referred to that in his letter to the Galatians, in words very familiar to us: "It pleased God... to reveal his Son in me, that I

might preach him among the nations." Service is bound up with vision.

Vision Emancipates

How important is vision, then, if it really is the background, the foundation, the basis of life and service in relation to the Lord Jesus. Vision has a wonderful power amongst the Lord's people. One of the effects of true vision, God-given vision, is to emancipate them from all that is less than the Lord, and that is no small effect. It is an emancipating power. This is where vision is needed so badly today. The Lord's people are so cramped, so small, so narrow, so bound, so shut in, hedged in, so parochial in their spiritual horizon. They are so limited by the common traditional acceptances, by "as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be" so far as a system is concerned. That is something which has become static, fixed. Paul himself moved in a very rigid and fixed realm, the realm of "Thou shalt," and "Thou shalt not," which had almost countless points of application in the sphere of a very rigid system of religious life, which mainly held him down to this earth. Then he had the vision of the Lord, and in the day in which he received his God-given vision he was emancipated from this earth, emancipated from everything earth-binding even in a religious way. He was emancipated from all that which had so rigidly and firmly, and with such terrific power, bound him all his previous life. It is - and we have often referred to it - one of the miracles of the New Testament how a rabid Pharisee, such a deeply dyed Jew as was Saul of Tarsus, should be stripped of the whole of that tyranny and bondage of Judaism, and come right out into a clear place where he said such a thing as this: "For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision, but a new creation." Think of a man like Saul of Tarsus saying that, with all the history behind him, the birth, the upbringing, and the training. It is not easy to get rid of a thing which is in your blood, and has been in your blood for countless generations. It is you to be that; you can never think of anything else. It is no passive thing, but an active, energetic thing in your very being to take that course. That was Judaism. All that tremendous vehemence of Saul of Tarsus as he was, more zealous than the rest; "I advanced... beyond many of mine own age... being more exceedingly zealous..." he said - all that was in the man's blood. And then you find that man out of it, repudiating it and turning upon it, ready to fight it, with a new force and a new power to lay it low. What has done that? Vision! Not just a mystical vision, but something more than the psychical. It is the miracle of a revelation of Jesus Christ, and nothing other than that will do it. This kind of vision emancipates from all that is less than the Lord, even though it be of a religious order.

Vision Unifies

Then again, vision, true, God-given vision, is a wonderful unifying and consolidating power. The passage we have taken from the book of Proverbs touches that. The Authorised Version reads: "Where there is no vision, the people perish," but the word "perish," while it is very good, does not really indicate what is there in the Hebrew. The Revised Version is a little better perhaps, but it only just seems to touch it: "Where there is no vision, the people cast off restraint." More literally it is this: Where there is no vision, the people disintegrate; if you like, go to pieces, fall apart, lose their cohesiveness, lose their solidity. That is very true. You have only to look to the days of Samuel. "In those days there was no frequent vision," and what were those days? Tragic days, terrible days! One of the tragic fruits of those days was that people said, "Make us a king like unto the nations," by which request they repudiated the theocracy, the Kingship of God, and wanted a man in the place of God. That is always disastrous. Up till that time God had been their King, their Lord; He had been on the Throne, but now they have lost their vision and put a man in His place, and what tragedy it was. The people went to pieces in those days. The Philistines got the upper hand, the Ark went into captivity, everything was marked by weakness, disintegration, the people fell to pieces, there was no vision.

There is a pathetic lack of that cohesion amongst the Lord's people today. Why all this disintegration, these fragments, these scattered parts? Why is there all this division amongst the Lord's people? Why? Because man's interpretations have taken the place of the Holy Spirit's revelation. Is that the truth? Oh, yes, that is true! When the Holy Spirit is in His place, and the people are being illumined and taught by Him there are no two minds; there is one mind, one vision, a wonderful integration. This is a tremendous need today, that there should be a new revelation by the Holy Spirit to the heart of God's people, so that they come into that revelation of Christ which the Holy Spirit gives, and with revelation they become one people, dominated by one vision. That is how it was at the beginning. You say: You are putting forth a counsel of perfection, something for which we dare not hope in these days. Well, I do dare to hope for it; not as embracing all the Lord's people, but I believe a far greater measure of this is possible than now exists. We are called to prayer that the Lord will give a vision to His ministering instruments in this day which will bring His people into a new revelation of Himself, and thus bind them together, not as an organisation, nor as a multitude of people who are accepting a certain interpretation, but bind them together by spiritual ties, because they have come to see the Lord in a new way. And all that we are asking for is that there shall be such a ministration of Christ by revelation of the Holy Spirit in this earth, that all that is less than Christ will go, and people will be bound to the Lord Himself. And if they are bound to Him, then there will be oneness, the falling apart will cease.

Vision Sustains

Then again, what a sustaining power vision is. Take the Apostle Paul again as an example. What was it that kept him going? If ever a man (speaking naturally) ought to have given up, it was he. I can conceive of Paul having resigned at quite a few places. If you or I had been the pastor of the Church at Corinth I think we should have resigned very quickly. Perhaps at some of the other places too we should have chosen a roving pastorate (if that is not a contradiction of term), because we could not endure it. But Paul stuck to it to the end; even when they gave him up he did not give them up. And how much he suffered, how much there was to make him break-down, but he went through until he could say: "I have finished my course, I have kept the faith." I can hear an echo even of the Master's words in that, in another sense: "No man taketh it from me, I lay it down of myself." It is a continuing unto the end by the power of God. But what was it that kept him going through? It was his vision of the Lord. It was the heavenly vision. It is a great sustaining power, this unveiling of Christ.

The Nature of the Vision

To say that it is a vision of Christ that we need may not get us very far, although we may see the need of it and the value of it. Paul says here that by the prophets concerning His Son revelation has been given in the Scriptures. But what we want to see, what we need to see, is that in the New Testament we have a gathering up in a spiritual way of the deeper meaning of the visions of the prophets. In this word at the commencement of the Roman letter, where the Apostle says that we have received that which was promised through the prophets concerning His Son, we have at least the suggestion that what is in the New Testament is the spiritual value of what the prophets saw, of what is in the vision of the prophets. We can only stay to indicate what we mean, and illustrate it in one or two instances.

We have said that in the New Testament we have in a spiritual way, for our own apprehension of Christ, that which was behind the vision of the prophets in truth and in principle. Let us take perhaps four illustrations from the prophetic vision.

The Vision of Christ as Sovereign Head of the Church

We turn to the prophet Isaiah, in chapter 6 of his prophecies, and read that which is very familiar: "In the year that king Uzziah died I saw the Lord, sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and his train filled the temple." The Gospel concerning His Son, promised through the prophets in the Scriptures. What is the Gospel in that? That is vision! What is our New Testament value of that? The New Testament is full of the Lord high and lifted up, sitting upon a Throne, and the New Testament is full of His train filling the Temple. What is that in other terms? It is the absolute Sovereignty of Jesus Christ as Head of His Church. "...raised him from the dead, and made him to sit at his right hand in the heavenlies ("sitting upon a throne"), far above all rule, and authority, and power, and dominion... ("high and lifted up") and gave him to be head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all ("his train filled the temple")." It is a revelation of Christ in His Sovereign Headship over all things to the Church which is His Body, which is to be the fulness of Him.

Get a vision of that. Get a revelation of that to your heart by the Holy Spirit, and see its emancipating power and its sustaining power. And that is for present revelation to the heart. That is the thing which the Lord has been seeking to reveal to our hearts more and more for a long time.

The point is this, that, inasmuch as that is the side of vision presented, you and I have to seek the Lord for spiritual capacity to see it. And that leads us to that other fragment in the same letter, from which we have just quoted: "That he would grant unto you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him, the eyes of your hearts being enlightened...". "The eyes of your hearts being enlightened"! That is the other side of vision.

Will you pray this for yourself? Will you pray this for all God's people? When the Lord's people get a new spiritual Holy Ghost revelation of the Sovereign Headship of Christ, and begin to hold fast the Head, they let go of everything that is local, and personal, and different, and scattered on the earth. That is the place to which to come for unity. We cannot be at variance with one another as the Lord's children if Christ is absolute Sovereign Head in our lives. When the Lord Jesus gets the complete mastery as Head in our lives, then all independence of action, and life, and all self-will, self-direction, self-seeking, self-glory and self-vindication will go. These are the things which set us apart from one another.

You pass from Isaiah, and as you do so you remember that you have the results of such a vision seen in this man Isaiah. Such a vision immediately has the effect of humiliating him to the dust. Oh, yes, we lose all our pride, all our importance when once we see the Lord in glory. "Woe is me..." That is humiliation! Then, after humiliation, there is consecration: "Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged." And, after humiliation and consecration, there comes vocation: "...who will go for us?" "Then I said, Here am I; send me."

A life suitable to the Lord's purposes in service is altogether the result of a revelation of the absolute Sovereign Lordship and Headship of Jesus Christ. It comes out of that. So it was in the New Testament. Go to the book of the Acts and you will see that the service which flowed out there flowed out from the exaltation of Christ which they had seen.

The Vision of Christ in Universal Dominion

Passing, then, from Isaiah, and Ephesians, and Colossians, we move to Daniel. We have to be fragmentary. We cannot go right through Daniel's visions, but, summing up the visions of Daniel, what is

the main result? Is it not the course of this world's history moving toward Christ as its consummation? The empires pass like a pageant before the spiritual eyes of this prophet. In swift succession by this vision he sees these mighty world empires, each one going down before its successor. And then at the end he sees a stone, cut without hands, break into the history of this world, and a Kingdom set up, the end of which is not seen and never will be seen; and the dominion, and the authority given to the people of the Most High, and Him coming to reign Whose right it is to reign; the consummation of the history of this world. The pageantry of empires all moving toward Christ. That is a great thing to apprehend spiritually, but the spiritual value of that is caught up immediately in the letter to the Colossians as well as in other places in the New Testament, and there it is made perfectly clear that God's predestined purpose for this world is that Christ shall at the end be All and in all, absolutely pre-eminent universally, and that, although it may seem that other powers are controlling this world's history, there are mighty forces coming in and swaying it, and seeming to touch its destiny. As Daniel saw these forces at work, as he saw, for instance, the conquests of Alexander the Great throughout this world, no doubt he wondered what the end of this was to be. This man had captured and conquered everything, subdued everything, and he had no more worlds to conquer, he had absolute dominion. And then Daniel saw Alexander the Great smashed with a blow, cut off before he reached middle life, and another power coming in. And Daniel looked on! What will the end of this be? He sees the end in the hands of the Son of Man.

You look out on the world today, and you might well say, looking at it naturally: Well, what will happen next? Things are going from bad to worse! Look at the state of things! Look at that awful thing which has its home in Russia, and what it is able to do; the millions of its own children within its own borders done to death on the slightest pretext of allegiance to God! You see that and other things in this world, and you say: What will the end be? Well, the end will be Jesus on the throne of universal dominion; nothing can hinder that! Get that into your heart, and see what a power that vision will have. Vision has mighty power. Where there is no vision the people will certainly go to pieces. You would go to pieces if you were left a prey to these world conditions, and if they were all that you could see; men's hearts truly failing them for fear; but it makes all the difference when you have vision.

Colossians 1 settles it once and for all. "In him were all things created... all things have been created through him, and unto him; and he is before all things, and in him all things hold together," and He is destined by the eternal counsels of God ultimately to have pre-eminence in all things. The first chapter of the letter to the Colossians is the spiritual summing up of the visions of Daniel.

The Vision of the Church which is His Body

Pass swiftly from Daniel to Ezekiel, and amongst many visions of God which Ezekiel had we just select one with which we are very familiar, from chapter 40, the vision of the temple which never has been yet, the temple which is for the end. The vision there is of an angel with a measuring rod - a reed - going in and measuring the court, measuring the temple, putting down precisely to a detail the measurement of everything related to that temple; the walls, their height, their length, their breadth; every passage, every corridor, every chamber, every vessel; all put down in its exact dimensions. Then it is precisely stated what these things are for; what this chamber is for, and what that chamber is for. Everything is described in its nature, its dimensions, and its purpose. And then out from the temple the river, from beneath the altar, issuing, gaining volume, depth, width, strength as it goes on and on. The trees on either side, bearing fruit continually, with leaves never fading. You say: What is the Gospel of that? Well, again you look to the letter to the Ephesians, and you have the whole thing quite clearly and precisely described and explained for you.

This temple has its counterpart spiritually in this dispensation in the Church which is His Body; and here in this temple we have Christ presented as the Church, and the measurements of Christ into which His people are to come, so that every one has to function, as Paul says in that letter "in due measure" (Ephes. 4:16). That is your measure in Christ. Do not fall short of it, and do not try to exceed it. And then coming up to our measure when we are together; Paul, says, "Till we all attain unto the unity of the faith... unto a full-grown man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ."

Not only have we a degree, but we have a place in which to function in Christ, for there are in this Temple the places of ministry, and every one has his appointed place in ministry, and every joint is to function, every member to fulfil his office: "For as the body is one, and hath many members (1 Cor. 12:12) "...and all the members have not the same office" (Rom. 12:4), yet they all have an office; not all the same, but all having a ministry.

Then there are these chambers for rest for the servants of the Lord. The resting places! And you and I have come to rest in Christ. We are so familiar with this that it strikes no new note of wonder in our hearts, but the Gospel is there in it all, and has come by revelation through the prophets.

If only you and I had that vision, of the Church which is His Body, the wonderful heavenly order, that every one of us is given a measure "according to our measure," and that we have to be effective in that measure! Every one of us is given a place in Christ, and every one of us is given a ministry in Christ, and every one, because we have a place and a measure, and a ministry, may know our own rest in Christ. The spiritual revelation of the Church as the Body of Christ is a wonderful thing, and when we see the Church like that how we feel ashamed of ourselves that ever we thought of some institution down here on this earth being the Church. In this heavenly revelation of what the Church is; all the saints in their place, respectively, coming up to their measure in Christ, fulfilling their ministry in Christ; that is the Church, the Temple, "a holy temple in the Lord." Will you pray for that vision, that revelation? Will you pray that the Lord's people everywhere may have that brought to them? It is something to pray about! That is a need today.

The Vision of the "Overcomer" Vessel

We close with just a word from Zechariah. Amongst the visions of Zechariah is that one from which we have already read in chapter 4. "And the angel... waked me, as a man that is wakened out of his sleep. And he said unto me, What seest thou? And I said, I have seen, and behold, a candlestick all of gold...." A candlestick all of gold! What is that in New Testament revelation? It is an instrument here on this earth which is wholly of God for bearing the Testimony of Jesus; something wholly of God; not man-made, man-constituted, but something which God has produced, in which there is the flaming Testimony of Jesus by the oil of the Holy Spirit.

Who shall say that the Lord does not need that today? Who will say that the Lord's people do not need to come back to that, or to go on to that, be for Him a vessel, an instrument, which is wholly God-constituted, made up of those Divine elements of the pure gold in which the Testimony flames and burns, and does not go out, because the unceasing oil of the Spirit is flowing unhindered? It is not impossible! It is not beyond the Lord's will for now.

These are parts of the vision of the Lord Jesus. They are only aspects of Christ, are they not? This is what we mean by the revelation of Jesus Christ. You see Him Head of the Church, Sovereign Lord, so related to His Body that He is the Body and His Body is Himself spiritually. And then all that that means of place,

and measure and ministry and enjoyment, of the Lord. Then the Lord as here expressed in a vessel which is all of Himself, with His Testimony livingly, flamingly in it.

Let this not be merely visionary. Ask the Lord to save you from the thing becoming visionary in that sense, but, oh, do pray that this which is Christ may become a living revelation in your heart. It is not something of the mind or of the imagination. Beloved, this is real! It can be put in colder language and terser terms, but this is the thing which has become the passion of some of our hearts; this is the thing which has emancipated some of us; this is the thing which is sustaining some of us; this is the thing which is constituting the ministry of some of us; and so we can say this is the thing which is holding some of us together, whereas nothing else would hold us together. It is the Holy Spirit's enablement of us to apprehend Christ.

We will close by asking the question of the angel: "What seest thou?" What is your vision? In the first place have you got a vision? Everything of life, and progress, and ministry springs out of vision, otherwise it counts for nothing. What seest thou? It is also important, when we have a vision, to be able to declare our vision. If you have a vision, can you state it? Can you declare it? Is it locked up in you?

All this leads, then, for the future to very definite prayer. This is the direction for prayer - the Lord's Testimony in reality, a vessel for that Testimony, true spiritual vision, the revelation of Christ to the heart. The Lord's people everywhere need vision. Let us pray that their eyes may be opened, that we may be, as far as possible, given an eye-opening ministry, that it might be true of us: "...to whom I send thee, to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan unto God, that they may receive remission of sins and an inheritance among them that are sanctified by faith in me." "Where there is no vision, the people perish." "I was not disobedient unto the heavenly vision." Let us ask the Lord to give us the vision Himself.

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