

The Vessel of the Testimony

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Church is a spiritual force and not just an organized religious system, and its vocation is to shine forth the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:1

Topics: "The Church as a Vessel", "Spiritual Liberation"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes that the Church should embody the spiritual essence represented by Paul, rather than seeking another individual like him. He explains that Paul was a chosen vessel, representing a new creation that fulfills God's purpose, supplanting the old vessel of Israel. Sparks highlights the necessity for the Church to be a spiritual force, liberated from external religious systems, and to shine forth the knowledge of God's glory through Christ. He calls for believers to recognize their identity as fragile vessels empowered by God's resurrection life, urging them to pray for a Church that reflects this divine calling.

Transcript

2 Cor. 4:1-7.

More than once we have heard it said that what the world needs today is another Paul. But two things have to be said in answer to that statement. One is that another Paul, or even Paul himself, would hardly get a hearing in the Christian world of today. He would be found to be running too severely counter to the Christianity of our time that it would do with him what Judaism did with the Lord Jesus, and with Paul, at the beginning. The other thing, which seems somewhat to contradict that is this, that it is very necessary and important to remember that Paul was a representative of the Church, or corporate vessel of the Lord's Testimony for the dispensation, and that the Lord never intended to repeat Paul personally, and to have an individual or personal Paul in every generation of this dispensation. But what the Lord did intend was that the whole of the Church should be in this dispensation what Paul was. Paul was brought in as a type, a representative, an embodiment of the whole Church for the dispensation, and that which was embodied by His servant Paul was to be the very constitution of the Church. Those features of Paul's spiritual life were to be the constituents of the Church throughout the dispensation so that we should be nearer the mark if we said that what is needed today is not another Paul but THE CHURCH ACCORDING TO PAUL, as spiritually constituted. It is not the individual or the personal Paul, but it is what came in through and with Paul spiritually, as constituting the Church, the whole Body.

A Chosen Vessel

That is the foundation of our present consideration. We are dealing with the vessel of the Testimony, and we know that right at the outset of Paul's spiritual life that very word is attached to him. In the very first hours of his relationship to Christ in a saving way the words concerning him were: "A chosen vessel unto me." We find that in the full unfolding of his spiritual life he does become a representative vessel, that is, a vessel to which the Church is to be conformed so far as the spiritual elements are concerned.

We are not forgetting that the Church is to take its pattern from Christ; that Christ is the Pattern of the Church, and that the Church takes its character from Christ and is to be conformed to Christ. But Christ has become in a peculiar way revealed to and in and through His servant Paul for practical purposes here in relation to the Church. It only needs to be said that not in a definite and systematic way was the Church revealed through Christ, but Christ revealed in that definite and systematic way the truth of the Church to and through His servant Paul. It is not the Church of Paul, but the Church of Christ; but the revelation of Christ has come through Paul. We must remember that no revelation is of value only in so far as it is wrought into the very experience of the person to whom it is given; so that it is Paul's spiritual history and experience which gives value to the revelation, and in that sense the truth has become of practical value because wrought in a man.

When we consider this chosen vessel, this representative vessel, there are quite a few things which are related.

The Previous Vessel Supplanted

We begin by saying that he, representatively, was the vessel which supplanted the other vessel. Perhaps the best way of explaining that is to turn to the Scripture itself, and compare two passages.

We look at a familiar passage in Jeremiah 18, where we are shown the potter's house, the potter's wheel, and the potter's vessel.

Verses 3-4, 6:

"Then I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought a work on the wheels. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter: so he made it again another vessel, as seemed good to the potter to make it.... O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? saith the Lord. Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel."

Now note, verses 7-10:

"At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up, and to pull down, and to destroy it; If that nation, against whom I have pronounced, turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation, and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it; If it do evil in my sight, that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good, wherewith I said I would benefit them."

Now turn to the letter to the Romans, chapter 9 and verses 21-25:

"Hath not the potter power over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honour, and one for dishonour? But what if God (though willing to show forth His wrath, and to make known His power)

endured with much long-suffering vessels of wrath, fitted for destruction (and cast them not at once away)? And what if thus He purposed to make known the riches of His glory bestowed upon vessels of mercy, which He had before prepared for glory? And such are we, whom He has called not only from among the Jews, but from among the Gentiles, as He saith also in Hosea, 'I will call them my people which were not my people, and her beloved which was not beloved'" (Conybeare).

The implications are perfectly clear from the context. Israel was a nation concerning whom God purposed good. That nation did evil, and the Lord repented Him of the good, and He plucked up that nation. When did He pluck up that nation? Changing the metaphor, it was the day when He cursed the fig tree, and the Jewish nation, which did evil in His sight although He had purposed good for it, was set aside.

That was the first vessel, and it was marred in the hand of the Potter. The Potter proceeds to make another vessel as is good to Him, to take its place, which supplants it, and which will fulfil the purpose which He had in His heart which the other vessel has failed to fulfil. The vessel which supplants the vessel that was is the Church, and Paul is a type of that as the chosen vessel. The whole history of Paul is a clear unveiling of the fact that God has brought in another vessel, which puts Judaism out of the way.

Is not that the import of the life of Paul, that Judaism is put away? And was not his supreme conflict with Judaism, the vessel that was still seeking to push itself into the place of God's purpose, but which God had repudiated? The Lord made another vessel, the Church, to be brought into its place. Paul was the very type and spiritually the embodiment of that, so that Paul becomes, as the representative, the vessel which supplants the other vessel.

That carries with it a very definite and wide significance for the Church. It means that in God's thought the Church is a vessel which spiritually fulfils all that purpose which was represented by Israel, but which Israel failed to fulfil. That is a very wide sphere of meditation, as to why Israel was constituted, the purposes of Israel. Those purposes are many and varied, and very wonderful; but Israel failed. God brings in a new vessel to fulfil those purposes spiritually, to take up all the spiritual things which lay behind what was typical in Israel. We only have to read the letter to the Hebrews (in the writing of which we verily believe Paul had some influence, and a very definite influence) to see that fact established, that in the Church there are spiritually all those things which lay behind the religious life of Israel.

We leave that for the moment with this closing remark, that the Church comes in and is represented by Paul as something which is in the place of a merely external religious system, even though that system may have been in vital relationship with God, even although that may have been brought about by God. Immediately that thing fails to be a spiritual force in the world it ceases to be God's instrument, God's vessel. And the same will have to be said of Christianity, any part of Christianity which goes the same way. Immediately it ceases to be a spiritual force in the world it ceases to be God's instrument.

So we draw our first conclusion from this, namely, that the Church is called in to be a spiritual force, and not merely an organised religious system. That is the vessel which comes in with Paul, and is bound up in his person.

A New Cruse

The second thing, which is closely akin to it, is that Paul very clearly represents the new cruse, a newness of the vessel. We are now thinking of the clean and clear cut which is seen in the life of the Apostle between what had been as his life religiously, and that which came in by his new relationship to the Lord

Jesus. Things were undoubtedly absolutely new. We do not mean by that that they were just fresh. There is all the difference between freshness and newness. You can make an old thing look fresh, but that is not the sense in which we are thinking of this new vessel. It is not fresh, it is new. It is something which never had been before. It means that there was an entire and final end to one history. That history of the Apostle Paul before the Damascus Road experience was closed fully and finally. The end came to that history, and an entirely new history began there. The two are divided by three years of solitude in Arabia, and then the beginning of something which was so utterly different from all that had been. There was no carrying over from the past. It would be well for you to read again thoughtfully these letters of Paul, in order to be confirmed in that one thing, of how completely the past history was closed for him, and how utterly different and new all was from the time when he came to see who Jesus of Nazareth was, and all that was bound up with Him.

Now come back to our point, which is Paul as representative of the vessel of the testimony, the embodiment of all the spiritual features and principles of the Church according to the mind of the heavenly Lord, and in this second thing we find the Church defined as something which is utterly new, carrying over nothing from the old life. It is, in its constitution, in all its members, in all its methods, in all its means, in all that it is and all that it has, something absolutely new. It brings nothing over from the old creation, from the old life; that is, there has been a history brought finally to an end where the Church is concerned. To put that more simply it means this, that the Body of Christ, the Church which is His Body, is composed of a company of people who have a clean cut between an old history and a new, and who do not bring over into their new realm, their new life, their new service, anything of the old creation, not even religiously.

That has been the snare of the enemy with so many, that while it is admitted that you do not bring over your old sinful ways or old sinful life, you do bring over something religiously. Now Paul is an outstanding example of the fact that that is not so. He will tell us that, so far as his religious life was concerned, it was of the white-heat kind, passionate, intense; "more exceeding zealous," he said. He came to see that it was all wrong, and it was all governed by other forces than the Holy Ghost. You may take it that any life governed by any other force than the Holy Ghost is a deceived life. It does not matter, though we may be intensely, and passionately, and utterly devoted to the Lord's interests, if we are putting the strength of our own natural life behind that passion we may be the most deceived of all people. I never had any doubt, but I am more convinced today than ever I was, that the ground of deception is a strong natural will projected into religious things, and the stronger the natural will projected into spiritual things the deeper the deception. In the case of Saul of Tarsus you have a terrific will projected into the realm of religion, and he has to confess in the end: "I verily thought that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus." He did what he thought he ought, and found that he was under deception, it was working in exactly the opposite way to which he thought it was working. There is a terrific danger of projecting any part of our natural life into the things of God.

The Church, in the mind of the Lord, is a thing which is new, out from heaven, all its energies and spiritual resource are of the Holy Ghost. You cannot have that until you have definitely closed the old creation history.

This is something for us to lay hold of, if we cannot understand it completely. If it seems somewhat beyond us, nevertheless to lay hold of, as simply as we can. The necessity that the Lord has a vessel which is new, that is, which has its old history of the natural life closed, and is now something altogether under the control, and government, and direction of the Holy Spirit, is something for which to pray, that the Lord shall get a people like that. That is what we mean when we say that Paul was brought in by the Lord to be a

representative of the Church, and the embodiment of the principles of the true Body of Christ. What is needed through this dispensation is that what is revealed through the Apostle Paul should be the nature of the Church: no carrying forward of old creation elements.

Divinely Apprehended

The third thing in this vessel of the testimony was a definite, Divine act of apprehending. Paul spoke of himself as having been apprehended of Christ Jesus. That is how he explained his experience on that road, that he was suddenly, out from heaven, apprehended. He was laid under arrest. It was as though, to speak in our more up-to-date language, the Lord said suddenly: I have got you! I have been on your track for a long time, but now I have got you! And Paul knew that he was apprehended. But it was a sovereign act, an act from heaven.

Our present thought in connection with this apprehending is that he represents the Church in that. The Church is not something which man can make. It is not something constituted by man. It is not something that we can set up, that we can bring about. It is not something which we can organise, and get people to join. We cannot make adherents to the Church. The Church which is called "the Church" today is very largely made up of those who have come under some sort of human influence, yielding to which they have "joined the Church"; and the trouble after that is to get rid of them, you wish most of them had never joined. When you get on to that level that is bound to be the trouble. The point is this, that the Church is a Divinely constituted thing, a thing which is the expression of the Divine Sovereignty. All that we can do is preach Christ. The Holy Ghost has to do the rest, and any member not added by the Holy Ghost to Christ will be a weakness to His Body. Apprehended of Christ Jesus! You are very safe when you are on that ground.

The Vessel Liberated

Once more, in this representation of the vessel we see the vessel liberated. Of course, our special means of seeing how completely this was so is Paul's own letter to the Galatians, the key word of which is "liberty," "our liberty in Christ." We know by now what the difficulty was. Those Judaisers still regarded Judaism as the Church, with its ritual, its form, its system, its order which they desired to impose upon every convert, and cause every believer to observe in the rigid letter of the law. Paul, in his own experience, by his own Divine revelation, stood utterly and absolutely against that whole thing, having seen that Christ is no longer a set of laws and regulations, external rites and forms; but Christ has fulfilled all that in His own Person, and now makes good spiritually to His own the value of that. He is the Altar; God and man meet in Him. He is the Sacrifice; sin is dealt with in Him. He is the Priest; the one Mediator between God and man. He is the very Tabernacle itself, and all gathering together in worship is not now to some temple, to some specific building, of necessity, but anywhere so long as He is the Centre; He constitutes the Church. The Church does not constitute itself by a membership roll and a special building, a place of assembly; it is being together with Christ in the midst which is an expression of the Church. He is the Church by His presence in and with His own. And so you go over the whole system and you find that it has ceased to be some external thing, and it has become purely a spiritual relationship to Christ in a living way. But the Judaisers said, No! except ye be circumcised you cannot be saved! This and that must be observed as the law! And so the battle raged, and Paul fought through to victory for the liberty of believers from all the law.

We have not to fight today that battle with Judaism, but a similar situation has arisen as Christianity has become very largely a system of external forms, rites, orders, largely man-governed, regulated and controlled; and the life has very largely gone out of the whole thing, it is a matter of bondage and spiritual death. Paul stands as a vessel absolutely liberated from all that sort of thing, and so he is a representation of the Church, whose liberty is of that character that Christ is Everything, and knowing Christ in a living way you have everything. You are not under any kind of external law, and you never need fear that you will break moral laws if you are in a living relationship with the Lord Jesus. The vessel is liberated. "Our liberty in Christ," Paul calls it.

The Vocation of the Vessel

This can be summed up in one word from 2 Cor. 4:6.

Paul said: "We have this treasure in earthen vessels...." What treasure? The shining forth of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ! What is the vocation of the vessel? What is the work, the ministry, of the Church? Unto what are we called as parts of that? For the shining forth of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

That is a great calling, but it is a great searching. We can test Churchmanship by that statement (if we may use that word). We say that we belong to the Church, and we are members of the Church. Well, what about the shining forth of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ? That is the purpose of the Church. That is the object of the vessel. Nothing can substitute that, but a very great deal can veil it.

We would like to add one word more to this, that in the case of Paul, not only was that true, but there is a marvellous manifestation of God in that vessel, especially in the direction of resurrection life. It seems that this is one of the primary aspects of the revelation of God in Christ. If you look for the traces of the knowledge of the glory of God in the New Testament you will find that the outstanding trace of that glory of God is the power of His resurrection.

Take Paul as an illustration again, and read the whole catalogue of his sufferings, of what he went through, and see him in his brokenness, weakness, feebleness; "in deaths oft," he says, despairing of life, with the sentence of death in him; and yet, what achievement! What ministry! What a tremendous accomplishment! What a range! What a depth! What a fulness! What an endurance! for he is more mighty today than he has ever been. How do you explain it? You do not explain it by Paul's physical strength. No! you do not explain it on any human ground. Though much has been said about his intellect, about his persistence, his wonderful will, and all these things; Paul would repudiate the whole thing, and he does. Here he says: "We have this treasure in vessels of fragile clay, that the exceeding greatness of the power might be of God, and not of ourselves." That is quite definitely saying: I am but a vessel of fragile clay, and if there is any accomplishment, if there is any endurance, if there is any effectiveness, it is to be set down to the power - the exceeding greatness of the power - of God and not of myself! It is God in this vessel, in the power of resurrection life.

Returning to our original thought, we see that Paul is a type of the Church as God means it to be in all its members, that there shall be that there which can never be accounted for on human grounds, the power of God in resurrection. Do you feel like a vessel of fragile clay? What do you follow that up with? Do you say, Well then, I am no good, I can serve no purpose, it is no use expecting anything from me, I have not got what is necessary to be of any use to the Lord! Is that what you are saying, because you feel a vessel of

fragile clay? Paul was that, but (a mighty "but") you see what is possible through vessels of fragile clay: The exceeding greatness of His power!

The Church as we know it today is all the time trying to be something other than a vessel of fragile clay; it does not want the world to look upon it as such. It wants to be something very imposing, which can stand up to the world on its own ground, meet it in its own terms. Yes, it has taken on the very habit, or it has developed the very habit, of trying to impress the world with its own resources. But in the New Testament it was a vessel of fragile clay. The comparison between the effectiveness today and the effectiveness then is a very sad comparison.

Now we have to sum up all this in a word of application. We have seen what the vessel of the testimony is, and we must set ourselves more than ever earnestly to pray that the Lord will have a vessel after this kind; that we individually may be such vessels; that companies of the Lord's people here and there may be constituted such vessels; that the Lord may have a vessel, represented by individuals and groups in this earth according to this pattern of His servant Paul, in whom He has given the revelation of His own mind in a living, experimental way as to what the Church, the vessel of the Testimony, should be. It is that which comes in in a spiritual way, as over against a merely historical and traditional way; that which marks the end of the history of nature, and the beginning of the history of the Holy Spirit in man; that which is sovereignly raised up by the Lord Himself, and not brought about by any activities of man by way of constituting it; that which is absolutely free in Christ, and to whom Christ is Everything, He fulfilling all the need of man as typically represented in the Old Testament - ritual, prophet, priest and king, altar and mercy seat, sacrifice and temple. He being all that, and in Him the knowledge of the glory of God going forth through vessels of fragile clay in the power of His resurrection.

Now you see that is a high thing. Can it be? Is it possible? Is it any use praying the Lord to have something like that? If it is true that that is the Lord's will, if that is the Lord's revelation, we shall be wrong in abandoning anything that the Lord has revealed as His will, though it seem impossible, though its recovery be exceedingly hard, nevertheless it is possible. It is possible in the individual. It is possible in you; it is possible in me, that in some real measure these things shall be true. And if it is possible in individuals, then what is the company but the aggregate of the individuals? Therefore the Lord can do this work. We must pray the Lord to bring about something like this in the earth; not a new sect, a new denomination, a new organisation, but His own children living in fellowship with Him on this ground. Let us pray for that very definitely.

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