

The Vocation of the Church

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Church must accept the costly way of the Cross, relying on God's deliverances and interventions, rather than its own abilities and efforts, in order to fulfill its Divine function and serve the heart of God's purpose.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 16:16, Isaiah 8:16-18, Isaiah 8:22 - 9:2, John 5:19, John 20:30-31, Ephesians 1:13, Ephesians 5:19, Philippians 3:14, 1 Timothy 1:11, Hebrews 2:13

Topics: "Prophetic Ministry", "The Vocation of the Church"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the church's vocation as a prophetic instrument representing God's mind and purpose, highlighting the need for believers to see the fullness of God's revelation and to be willing to pay the price for it. He discusses the importance of being a testimony to the world, as seen in the prophetic role of individuals and the church as a whole, which must reflect God's extraordinary work. Sparks warns against complacency and the temptation to settle for a lesser experience of faith, urging believers to commit to a deeper relationship with God that transcends ordinary human efforts. He stresses that true success in ministry comes from God's intervention, not human ability, and challenges the church to embrace its costly calling as signs and wonders in the world.

Transcript

"The gospel of the glory of the blessed God" (1 Tim. 1:11).

"The gospel of your salvation" (Eph. 1:13).

"The mystery of the gospel" (Eph. 5:19).

We were speaking in our previous meditation about the testimony in Zion, "...whither the tribes go up for a testimony unto Israel". We saw that "the tribes" do not mean the whole of Israel. "Three times in a year shall all thy males appear before the Lord thy God in the place which he shall choose" (Deut. 16:16) - a representation in Jerusalem, in Zion, for a testimony to the rest everywhere, wherever they were. And Zion is just that - a representation of God's mind on behalf of all His people; something fuller apprehended by some not necessarily chosen for it, but who choose it, who are prepared to pay the price for it, who are prepared to go the journey; and in them is found God's mind in greater fullness for the rest of His people.

A Prevailing State of Need

I want to bring you to another passage of Scripture in the prophecies of Isaiah.

"Bind thou up the testimony, seal the law among my disciples. And I will wait for the Lord, that hideth his face from the house of Jacob, and I will look for him. Behold, I and the children whom the Lord hath given me are for signs and for wonders in Israel from the Lord of hosts, who dwelleth in mount Zion" (Isa. 8:16-18).

"...and they shall look upon the earth, and, behold, distress and darkness, the gloom of anguish; and into thick darkness they shall be driven away. But there shall be no gloom to her that was in anguish. In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali; but in the latter time hath he made it glorious, by the way of the sea, beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations. The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light" (Isa. 8:22-9:2).

The particular verse that I am lighting upon is verse 18 of chapter 8. The whole section gives you the setting for this verse. The Lord's people in general are not seeing, that is, they are not seeing the great revelation that God has given concerning them and their glory and their vocation. Will you challenge that today? It is not a criticism, it is not a judgment, it is one of those things that we very much dislike saying. It is so easy to find fault and point out bad conditions; you can go on like that for ever. One would very much like never to have to do that sort of thing; and yet you are up against it all the time. The Lord's people are not seeing the greatness of His purpose in Christ, the vastness of that which has come from the eternal counsels. They are seeing so little, and a great many of them are not willing to see - that is the further tragedy. They are satisfied, they do not want any more, and many are suspicious and prejudiced and shut up; they will not have it, the Lord has not a clear way. Again, there are many who will not pay the price - not the price of their salvation, but of what it means to go on to all the Lord's thought. That price is the price of popularity and acceptance with men, of large doors of opportunity, prestige, and such things. That is a very general situation.

A Prophetic Instrument - 'For Signs and Wonders'

In such circumstances, what will the Lord do? He will bring into a company a prophetic instrument. In the case before us it is the individual, the prophet, to begin with; He will bring into being a prophetic instrument, that which will represent His thought - for you know quite well that the title of the prophet is "Son of man", and that is a phrase which always means representation. (He occupies the aspect of man-form in the cherubim or the four living ones; man-form - representation, Son of man.) He knows God's mind for His people, he has the thoughts of God in fullness. In a day of shadows and darkness and declension, God will bring into being such an instrument - and we are thinking of it in the corporate sense now. It has ever been His way. He will deal with that instrument in a strange way. There will be nothing normal in its experience, nothing ordinary - you might say, nothing straightforward. It is a strange, mysterious, and altogether extraordinary way that the Lord takes a prophetic instrument. See what He told these prophets to do - all sorts of extraordinary things! Ezekiel must lie for many days in the sight of the people, first on his left side and then on his right. And the people looking on say, 'What is this man doing? He is mad!' But all that is constituting his message. The way of a vessel for this purpose is not a straightforward way, as men call it. It is an unusual way. The experiences of such a vessel are all off the usual lines, and the people concerned very often cannot be understood. You can write up some things about the work of God and the instrument of God's work, and it is all clear and straightforward. But God gets something like this - and you cannot explain it. All sorts of questions are going round - 'What are you doing? What are you? What are you after? We don't understand.'

And every issue of that instrument is an indication of the particular purpose for which the instrument is called. "I and the children whom the Lord hath given me are for signs and for wonders in Israel". Here is a vessel, and the children represent all the aspects, the outworkings, the issues, of that vessel. How am I going to explain that to you? In the case of a vessel that is held by God for this particular purpose, every means used, every method followed, every piece of work that is done, will be in keeping with the Divine thought at the root, and will be an indication that this is not something ordinary, but something extraordinary, unusual.

Having said that, I have touched a spring. I am sure that many of you are seeing a long way ahead, but I shall have to explain it. Please do not think I am criticising. I recognize this - and let me say it again with great emphasis - that God employs different means and instrumentalities for different purposes, and you must not try to conform every instrument and vessel that God takes up to one mould, one purpose, one idea, one direction. When the Church, as the Church, failed to fulfil the Divine function of carrying the gospel to the unenlightened, God raised up vessels to do it, and so you have many institutions; and not one of us would dare to say that God never employed them, that they are outside of His thought and consideration. We should be saying the utmost untruth to hint at such a thing. He has used and He does use them, and many other things too He has employed for His purposes; but it does not mean for a moment that He has departed from His one true, essential, original thought as to how and by what means things ought to be done. He will always come back, if He can, to make the Church His vessel, and any other means will only go so far. If it is going to fullness, it will have to come back to His original idea. Do not let us think that the things which God has used He has not used, and that they are all false and wrong. But when God does seek to get that vessel which is essentially related to fullness, you will not find that He deals with it in the same way as He deals with others, and you will not find that He allows it to employ the means and the methods that others are allowed to employ. Here the thing itself and all its activities, its issues, its sons, its offspring, will be signs of something - signs of some essential nature and character, something very much nearer to the thought of God. They will signify that and they will be signs and wonders. Signs - yes, they signify something that God is doing and is after; they will all point to that. Wonders - yes, they will all be in the realm where it is utterly impossible to man; and that is one of the things that make all the difference.

'All of God' - A Costly Vocation

When God gets that which comes most closely into relation with His full thought, He will put it into a realm where man can do nothing, and everything associated with it will say, 'It is God alone, it is only the Lord, no man can account for this. Look and see if you can honestly trace this at all to any man or men or people.' Look at the thing. Is it something with names, titles, influence, status, and all that is so commonly associated with a 'successful' work? No; this is of God or it is nothing. No great names, no great people, no great natural gifts, no great or outstanding human qualifications; weak, in itself helpless, foolish, often having to say, 'I do not know'; shut up like that, just thrown right back upon God, and if it is going to be anything at all, it must be by the Lord's doing; if it is not of the Lord, there will be nothing. You can only account for it on that ground, that it is of the Lord. The Lord originated it, the Lord has kept it going, and the Lord is doing it. "I and the children whom the Lord hath given me are for signs and for wonders". There is something about this which is inexplicable on any human ground. That is how it is going to be, it must be, if it is going to approximate most closely to Christ.

I have John 5 before me as I speak. Here is Christ, the full embodiment of Divine thought, in Whom the perfection of those eternal counsels is centred, Who is to be the expression of God's mind in utterness.

Hear him say, "The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father doing: for what things soever he doeth, these the Son also doeth in like manner... I can of myself do nothing". But listen, the One Who says that, immediately goes on to say, "As the Father raiseth the dead and giveth them life, even so the Son also giveth life to whom he will". You can account for that on no other ground than God. The Son can do nothing; God raiseth the dead; He gives the Son to do what only God can do. That is the principle we are getting at. We cannot get beyond Christ in utterness as to God's mind, and yet He says, 'Nothing out from Myself - it is God.'

Then Isa. 8:18 is quoted in Hebrews 2:13 and put right into the mouth of the Lord Jesus. "I and the children whom God hath given me". He has taken up the principle, and if you look at the context of that statement in Hebrews 2 you see it is this, that the children conform to Him, take their nature from Him. Now what is it? "I and the children whom God hath given me are for signs and wonders". Oh, is Christ a sign? Why, in John's Gospel everything that He did was a sign. And what was it a sign of?

"Many other signs... did Jesus... these are written, that ye may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:30-31). It was a sign that God was here in this One. "And wonders"; and what is the essence of a wonder? Why, this cannot be attributed to anything or anyone but God. Read John 9, and note the issue. The poor fellow whose eyes the Lord opened could not understand these wise people and their logic, their reasoning. "He opened mine eyes... Since the world began it was never heard that anyone opened the eyes of a man born blind.

If this man were not from God, he could do nothing". 'Don't you see this must be God? He must be something more than a man.' And that is why they cast the man out - because he made Jesus God. That was the effect of the signs and wonders - 'it is only the Lord!' Ah yes, that is the nature of a vessel, an instrument, which is going to serve the heart of God's purpose. That is a very costly way. You will have nothing usual. Oh, how we long to get things straightened out and have a straightforward course!

Yet we know quite well we are never going to have it. We are never going to have our affairs running without a difficulty. Other people with their family life - how easy-going it is! Everything for them seems to go evenly, but our affairs never go just on that straightforward track; there always seems to be something in our situation we cannot cope with, it is beyond us, and unless the Lord handles it we are in the most awful and hopeless confusion. I wonder how many people can accept that as being right - that is how it should be and how it must be, and (the Lord help us!) how it always will be if we are really committed to the basis that everything is to be of God.

May it not be - and I speak with experience in this matter - that the Lord is trying to say to us, 'Why do you not capitulate to that and take a positive attitude in acceptance of it? I am waiting for you to do that. You are trying to alter it, to get out of it, you are rebelling, fighting against it and if only you knew it you are all the time frustrating the very thing you are seeking. Why don't you recognise that a situation like that is absolutely essential to My intervention so that achievement will come not by your cleverness, your ability, your acumen, but by a miracle every time; it will be God?'

Ought we not to try to face this - that we are called into a realm where God deliberately plans that we should live on the basis of His deliverances, and where we are not allowed to get through on the level of the ordinary. Here again, though, is a peril. We must not become impractical, and simply sit down and wait for the Lord to work miracles for us. We must do our part, as far as in us lies, and cooperate with the Lord in every practical way that is open to us; but even so, we shall often find that we shall never get through

apart from a very real intervention of the Lord in such a way that when we are through it is manifest that it was not our effort that brought success but the Lord's working. The testimony will be - 'it was the Lord's doing'.

The Need for a Definite Committal

I wonder if what has been said has helped you at all. It helps me. The difficulty for you and for me is going to be to accept this and put our feet down on it. The Lord must present His mind in greater fullness to His people, and He must have that through which He can present it. He is seeking to get that more and more. But there comes a point where all of us have to have a transaction with the Lord about it. You can go away and be an 'ordinary' evangelical Christian if you like.

You need not go right on with the Lord, but you have to risk a good deal if you say No to Him. You will come to the time when you will look back and say, 'I missed God's best'. But I do not want to frighten or drive. We are here just to give what God has shown us of His greater fullness of purpose - and we are as yet only in the shallows of that vast fullness: but, so far as He has shown, we have to speak it. He must show it. "Son of man, show the house to the house of Israel, that they may be..." (Eze. 43:10).

Be what? The rest is with the people to whom it is shown. Are we of the number of those who will accept and yield to what He shows? Again and again in some more acute form the question arises as to whether we are going on in this costly way. We are required to face this and to make a decision before the Lord in our hearts as to whether we are going on, whether we are going to stand with Him for the fullest expression of His thought, or whether we are going to decide on some lesser course.

There are plenty of arguments to induce us to take the easier way if we are prepared to listen to them. 'Most other Christians take the easier path, and God uses and blesses them. What more is required?' All I say is this - if you have good reason to think that the Church today as a whole is in the good of the greater revelation of God's purpose in Christ, if you are sure they are, then go the way of the majority; but if you feel that there is something more needed - the Church needs something, you need something more - well then, it is going to cost.

You will be saved all right if you put your faith in the Lord Jesus, but that is not the point. You will not lose your salvation, but you may lose the prize. Salvation was never anything earned, but there is something called the prize (Phil. 3:14). We are not going to say what that is at present, but we are called to face the question whether the Lord has not got something more that He wants for His people and that He would give through us, having given it to us: or (to put that in another way) something into which He would bring His people because He brought us into it in experience, in life.

Is that so? Well then, we are all of us up against a crisis, I as much as you. Let me say this from my own heart, that I personally am quite frequently brought up against this crisis as the cost of this way of the Cross is pressed home. I have to stand back and say, 'Well, what was the basis upon which I started in this way?' What was the basis upon which we started? Was it not on the basis of John 5? It was a thing we were always talking about. We did not know all it meant by a long way, but we said quite definitely, 'God wants something here on this earth which declaredly and manifestly can do nothing for Him out from itself.

We will give Him a chance to do it all, that no one will ever be able to say, This is due to any man's great gifts or to this people's outstanding qualifications and qualities. If ever there is anything at all, the only explanation will be that the Lord did it.' That was the foundation, but how that gets pressed home as you

go on! It is a challenge all the way along, and it comes up in ever new situations, new expressions. 'Are you still prepared to stand on the ground that it is just the Lord or nothing at all?

If the Lord does not come in in an altogether new way, you are finished!' Are you prepared for that? There is a mystery about this, the mystery of the gospel. It is not a matter of terms. This is where many have made a mistake; they think this mystery is a matter of phraseology and truths - 'It is the truth of the Church,' they say, and all that sort of thing. Oh, brethren, God save us from that mistake! This ministry cannot be fulfilled along the lines of terminology. There is a mystery about it; it is the mystery of revelation, something deep down which you cannot explain by getting commentaries on the subject and collecting all the data about it and then giving it out.

That is not it, that does not work. It may be the same phraseology, the same ideas, but it does not produce the same results. You cannot explain the mystery of what is of God. It is a deep, hidden secret of God Himself. That is a tremendous challenge. I say again it is a very costly way, and it is for us to say, and, as is necessary, to say again and yet again, 'I can have no other way, I must go on with God, whatever the cost.' The Lord help us to that position.

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