

The Work and the Workers

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores God's movements throughout history and the critical role of chosen vessels in His work of restoration.

Scripture: Nehemiah 3:5, Nehemiah 4:6, John 3:8, Acts 2:1-4, 1 Corinthians 3:2, Ephesians 4:16, Hebrews 8:1, Hebrews 11:10, Revelation 3:2, Revelation 21:2

Topics: "The Testimony of Christ", "Divine Movements"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the dynamic nature of God's work through history, illustrating how divine movements are often marked by both intrinsic fullness and progressive recovery. He draws parallels between the rebuilding of Jerusalem's wall in Nehemiah and the early church's testimony in the Book of Acts, highlighting the importance of being instruments of God's vision and passion. Sparks points out that God's chosen vessels often face unique challenges and must be guided by the Holy Spirit, leading to a corporate unity among believers. The sermon calls for a renewed commitment to the testimony of Christ, urging the church to recognize their role in the ongoing work of God.

Transcript

When the writer of the letter to the Hebrews had been saying many things, he evidently had a feeling that it all needed to be gathered up into one clear, precise statement, and so he wrote: "Now in the things which we are saying the chief point is this". The margin says, "Now to sum up what we are saying..." (Heb. 8:1). Such a need is present with us at this point, so let us try to collect and to focus what we have been saying thus far.

Divine Reactions

The history of God's work is the history of movements and counter-movements, of action and reaction, of incline and decline, of advance and arrest or reverse. In one of the earliest books that we published, these words occurred at the commencement: 'There are two things which it is very important that we should have clearly before us. These two things, as we put them, may seem to contradict one another or to be paradoxical. One is that all the way through the ages God has constantly done a new thing. The other is that what has always been God's new thing from man's standpoint, has not been new from His own.'

And then we went on to point out that God always begins from completeness. He has everything in Himself fully and finally before He makes a beginning, and all His subsequent activities are really working

backward to fullness, although to man they appear to be the new things of God. The course, then, has been that God begins with fullness. Man falls away and loses that fullness. Then God reacts and steadily moves in progressive and gradual recovery of that fullness.

And every fresh movement of God is marked by two features.

In the first place, intrinsic fullness; that is, although it may be for the moment a partial thing only, it has intrinsic values in it. It is something which has all the potentialities of the whole, because everything that God does, however small it may be at the moment, has all His mind in it and behind it. God is not just occupied with fragments as though they were the whole, but with parts in which the whole is potentially included.

And then, in the second place, His movements are always an advance upon those which preceded them. That is, every movement of God sees an addition to what He has done before. Although He may have taken these steps from time to time in the way of recovery, it has been progressive, and now the next step will represent something added, something more, a stage further on in His work of recovering the original fullness. I hope that is clear. It is very important to get that background and that foundation.

Then we find that there are some inclusive or major factors in these movements of God - what we have called, in the title of the volume just quoted from, *The Divine Reactions*. One of those major factors is an instrument raised up by God in sovereignty, with God's vision and God's passion; an instrument raised up by God in sovereignty - which means that this is an act of God, and, being a sovereign act, may have nothing at all to account for it from any other standpoint. It is not that the instrument is one which all observers would say was the right instrument; not that the man or the vessel is such as would win the approval of the world's mind. God acts sovereignly, and very often in these reactions He has chosen instruments which, both in their own judgment and in that of others, were not the ones to have been chosen. They themselves were very conscious of their own lack of qualification for their calling, and very often other people had the same kind of thought about them - that they could do better, that they were not doing what was expected of them and in the way in which they should do it. But God sovereignly chose them, in His own wisdom, and stood by them, and proved that this was of Himself.

A Vessel Marked by Vision and Passion

But such a vessel, be it personal or be it collective, has always been in possession of God's vision. Such an instrument had seen the Lord, seen the mind of God, seen the purpose of God, become captured and captivated by that thing which God had purposed from eternity, and seen it in very much greater fullness than others: not only seeing, being in principle a 'seer' of the mind and will and purpose of God, but also being mastered by the passion of God for it, brought into what we have earlier in these meditations called the travail of God unto His end. These are major factors in all Divine movements. Every fresh step that God has taken has been marked by these two things. Let it be recognized, because it explains so much.

The Peculiar Treatment of the Vessel

Then this vessel, that has seen the purpose of God - this calling, this "great work" embodied in any present movement of God - has its own very peculiar history under God's hand. It is something to take very careful note of, that God deals with such an instrument as He deals with no other. He deals with that instrument - again I say, it may be personal or it may be a collective body, a company - God deals with that instrument called for this specific end of His in a peculiar, a strange way. He deals with it differently

from all His dealings with other people and other things; it is never safe for any called into the full purpose of God to judge the dealings of God with them alongside of His dealings with other people. That will always be dangerous. His ways with such a work and such an instrument are His own peculiar ways, and therefore vessels for this purpose, instruments to this end, have their own peculiar perils. They become involved in peculiar conflict, strange pressure, strange happenings, strange ways of God. God is dealing with them in relation to specific purposes.

Now, the book of Nehemiah, with which we have been occupied, the last book of Old Testament history, is an inspiring and instructive representation of all that we have just said. We have said that the natural divisions of that book are in relation, firstly to the wall, the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem, secondly to the work and the workers, and thirdly to the involved warfare. We have spent most of our time so far with the wall. Let me quickly go over that ground again, perhaps in a slightly different way from the way we have so far taken.

The Wall of Jerusalem A Figure of Christ

What is the wall? The wall of Jerusalem is a figure of Christ - first of all in the sight of Heaven, in the light of Heaven, in the eyes of Heaven; how Christ is from Heaven's standpoint. That is always the starting-point of any appraisal or judgment. The wall is also a figure of Christ as presented to the world, and then as presented to the kingdom of Satan, the hostile forces. It is Christ in those three outward senses - toward Heaven, toward the world, toward the forces of evil. They are all very interested in this wall. You can see that in the book of Nehemiah.

Heaven is very interested in this wall. That is where we begin. God acts, and it is a grand thing when the wall is finished. And all those hostile forces were so angry that Nehemiah was able to say - and they were compelled to admit - that this work was of God. God was interested, Heaven was interested; it was something in the light of Heaven. Then, as to the world, the wall had its own testimony. its own declaration; we will not stop with that for the moment. So far as the kingdom of Satan was concerned, it is very clear that that kingdom was intensely interested. We shall probably occupy ourselves later almost entirely with that aspect, when we come to the warfare.

But then there was a fourth aspect, namely, what the wall means to the Lord's own people: in other words, what Christ means to the people of God as a great, inclusive, defensive stronghold, and in the glorious impartation of His excellences and perfections to His own people. The last mention of walls in the Bible is of a wall of magnificence, a wall of gems. It is the perfections, the glories, of Christ, and the people of God in the good thereof before God.

So, then, the wall is a figure of Christ in this fourfold aspect.

Going back, you remember that Abraham, or Abram, as he was then, was separated from Babylon and Chaldea and all that that meant, and we are told that he 'looked for the city which had the foundations' (Heb. 11:10) - the type of that heavenly city, that new Jerusalem, which eventually, in its completion, will 'come down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God' (Rev. 21:2). Abraham's vision of a city was the type of that heavenly Jerusalem. These two cities, Babylon and Jerusalem, have always been in conflict. When the Lord's people declined from His glorious conceptions and intentions concerning Jerusalem, the only alternative for them was Babylon - the false thing from which God had called them out in their very father, Abraham. They were going back into that from which they had been separated in Abraham. As we have pointed out, the Lord let them have a taste of that, and for many of them the taste

was too much. They were glad to get back to Jerusalem at any cost, however Jerusalem might be at the time.

Now, when the Lord Jesus came, He did two things. He repudiated the world, as represented by Babylon, the false kingdom, and He repudiated the earthly Jerusalem, because it no longer expressed the Divine thought; and He gathered into Himself all those Divine thoughts as to what the city was meant to be. He not only personally took the place of the temple, but He took the place of Jerusalem, in a spiritual way. He was and is the embodiment of all God's thoughts about this city, as encompassed and delineated by the wall. So that if we enquire into what this wall means and what this city means, we shall not be merely studying a theme, or some object; we shall be called to contemplate the Lord Jesus.

It is very important that we should forget our illustrations sometimes, get behind our types and our figures, and look straight at that which they represent - shall I say, straight at Him whom they represent. A critic of Francis Thompson, the poet who wrote *The Hound of Heaven*, said that you could not see his landscape for his churning sea of metaphor. And sometimes our typology veils, hides, obscures, that which is typified. I hope that when we speak of the wall and of Nehemiah we are not going to fall into that snare, but that our eyes will all the time be seeing through Nehemiah, through the wall, to Him who is the One really in view.

The Correspondence Between Nehemiah and the Book of the Acts

Well, we have to move on still further, because God did recover His testimony in fullness on the day of Pentecost. It is helpful to see how there is a correspondence between the book of Nehemiah and the book of the Acts of the Apostles. The testimony is raised again in fullness; the testimony of the Lord, "the testimony of Jesus", came into completeness and fullness on the day of Pentecost, and all the features of the book of Nehemiah are found in the book of the Acts, especially in the first chapters. We shall look at that more closely in a moment. I mention it because it may be helpful to you, in reading the book of Nehemiah, not just to read it as a book of history, or even as the last historical book of the Old Testament, but to read it with the book of the Acts before you all the time, and just see how these two books correspond all the way through.

But what I want to say here, before going further with that, is this: that, although the Lord, on the day of Pentecost, recovered His testimony in greater fullness than ever before (except for His original intention, which was in His view before all things), it was not very long before the counter-action set in again, the decline. Before we are through our New Testament we are beginning to see gaps in the wall, weaknesses in the testimony. We can indeed go much further than that, for when we read the first letter to the Corinthians, and see all the rubbish there, we would say that the testimony seems to have been almost completely destroyed. What rubbish is revealed in that first letter to the Corinthians! What a state of wreckage and breakdown! And when we come to the end of the New Testament letters and take up the book of the Revelation, with its messages to the seven churches in Asia, we have undoubtedly a yet further picture of a broken wall: the testimony is disrupted again, there is nothing whole. "I have found no works of thine fulfilled" (Rev. 3:2). The testimony is broken, there are big gaps in it, and that is its state as the New Testament closes.

Since then, not once nor twice, but many times, God has acted again to bring back bit by bit His original purpose and testimony. I am not going through the history of those past centuries. You meet the testimony in various forms, but you know that God has not given it up. God has not abandoned it; God has come

back, and He has come back again, seeking to recover now this, now that, now something else; ever moving towards the original fullness, to have it in completeness. Thank God that today there is very much more of His testimony than there was in the Dark Ages. Today many of the great things of the New Testament are established in the Church. They are great factors. It is not necessary for me to mention them, but God has moved on steadily with His remnants, ever bringing something back.

The point with which we are concerned is this. Is He not at this very time in need of further recovery, and giving Himself to it? and might it be, in His sovereignty and in His grace, that we are related to the present movement of God in recovering the wall in fullness and in completeness? It may not be ours to build it, it may not be given to us to make it full; but it may be our calling to add something to do something toward this matter of finishing the testimony of Jesus; and if this time corresponds to the book and work of Nehemiah, that is, the end of the dispensation, we may feel that we are in the last stages and the last phases of the testimony of Jesus. We are, indeed, not without some reason for thinking that that is so.

Now let us come back and look more closely at this matter of the correspondence between Nehemiah and the book of the Acts, for we shall now be engaged not so much with the wall as with the work and the workers.

A Movement From Heaven

In the first place, as you take up both of these books, Nehemiah and Acts, you become aware of the fact that there is a movement from Heaven, that the brooding, all-pervading Spirit of God is on the move. In the book of Nehemiah, it has commenced there in Babylon. The Spirit of God has started to move. First of all, He stirs up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia to make that facilitating decree and provision. There is a movement from Heaven. And then it has moved into the heart of this man Nehemiah, and has created this deep concern and unrest, this discontent with things as they are. The Spirit of God is on the move. And then, by the facilitation, Nehemiah comes to Jerusalem, and the spirit that is in him, that urge that is in him, spreads - first to some brethren and then, with very few exceptions, to all the people. It is said of some that they "put not their necks to the work" (Neh. 3:5), but they are the exceptions. The Spirit is on the move, creating first of all this dissatisfaction with things as they are, this unrest about the situation, this sense that things ought to be different. It is not, as I have said earlier, just a spirit of grumbling and of criticism; it is a work of the Spirit. It is positive, not negative; it is constructive in its object and not destructive. The Spirit of God is on the move again, as He was in the first earthly creation, brooding and moving to bring order out of chaos. Here it is again in the beginning of this book of Nehemiah.

You pass to the book of the Acts, and you know only too well that Heaven is on the move, the Spirit is on the move. Something is happening: the long night seems to be passing, streaks of light are shooting across the horizon, there is a sense of awakening and movement; and on that great day the thing breaks - Heaven is cleft, the Spirit descends, and the Spirit's movement begins. It begins with a nucleus, but then through the nucleus the Spirit moves out and lays hold of others and brings them into the one vision and the one passion of the heart of God. In Nehemiah we have it put this way: "for the people had a mind to work" (Neh. 4:6). But now look at the book of the Acts and see these very people! That is the only way in which you can describe those early chapters: "the people had a mind to work".

The Governing Motive of the Full Testimony of the Lord

The purpose - the full, complete testimony of the Lord - is common to Nehemiah and to the book of the Acts. We could dwell with that, but I think it is only too obvious, from those early chapters, that those early

proclamations, that early preaching of the Church and the apostles and the evangelists, was a testimony to the absolute supremacy, fullness, completeness, sufficiency and finality of Christ. It was to that, in figure and type, that Nehemiah and the people were committed in their day.

But let this thing take hold of us. Let us not be thinking back centuries, but bring this right into our own present. Are we people with a mind that there shall be a full, unlimited and unbroken testimony of the Lord - people dominated by God's purpose and moved with God's passion? Are we?

The Government of Christ as Lord

Now let us look at some of the factors involved. Firstly, it is a very impressive thing how everybody submitted to Nehemiah. That is saying more than you realize unless you have read very carefully the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. If you read the book of Ezra, you will find that there were a good many recalcitrant people and rulers and priests, who had their own mind about things and their own will and their own way. They were just not going to have Ezra, and his ideas. There is a good deal of the personal and the selfish coming out and asserting itself. But when you come to Nehemiah, that is all gone. When this man comes in, everybody seems to give him his place, everybody seems to recognize that he is the man: they all do as they are told, they fall in - he can do what he likes with them. You see, some of these rulers have bought the people's property and land: they have enriched themselves at the expense of the people, and the poor people are in a grievous state because of them. And Nehemiah says, Now then, you give it all back, every bit of it; you refund every penny!" You put that suggestion to any man of the world and see what you get! But these people do it: it seems that it does not matter what Nehemiah requires or demands - they do it.

Come over to the book of Acts. Here all recognize that Jesus is Lord and subject themselves to Him. There is only just the one rebellious element, in Ananias and Sapphira; but it did not pay them to break the regime of Christ's lordship - it broke them. But for the rest, everything went - properties, lands, money, themselves, everything - all came into wonderful subjection to the Lord Jesus; and you will never get anywhere with His full testimony until He takes pre-eminence and precedence over all life and all that life contains.

There is a corresponding factor which is perfectly clear. The people, the priests, the rulers, all gave Nehemiah the place of headship. In this other movement of God, everybody gave Jesus Christ His place as Head. He was indeed not only preached as Lord, but was yielded to as Lord with everything.

A Master Passion For the Testimony

And then another thing common to these two books is how the testimony mastered everything and everybody. It was not only Nehemiah, but the thing for which Nehemiah stood. This is seen in two respects.

Firstly, the wall: how the wall became the dominating object and interest of everybody. If the wall is a type or figure of the testimony of the Lord Jesus, it just means that the testimony of the Lord Jesus in fullness became the master-concern of everybody. They had nothing else, for the time being, for which to live, but His testimony. The wall overshadowed everything and everybody. And so it was in the first days of this dispensation. The testimony of Jesus so overshadowed everything else that they lived for its furtherance. They just lived and thought and planned and dreamed of the furtherance of this testimony.

The Voice of the Spirit

But then you notice that there was another factor in Nehemiah. It was the trumpet. The man who had the trumpet was stationed by Nehemiah, and you remember the words: "In what place soever ye hear the sound of the trumpet. resort ye thither unto us" (Neh. 4:20). The trumpet was in charge. What is the trumpet? I think that the trumpets of the Old Testament are always types of the voice of the Holy Spirit; in other words, "what the Spirit saith unto the churches". It was by the sound of the trumpet that Israel moved through the wilderness, whenever they were to move, the trumpet sounded. In figure, they moved by and in the Spirit, under the government of the Spirit.

That is, of course, too obvious in the book of the Acts - the government of the voice of the Spirit. We cannot too strongly stress that. Perhaps I am in peril of trying to crowd too much in, without giving due consideration to every point. But do give heed to this. I am saying a very terrible thing now, but I am perfectly aware of what I am saying. I have tested it well over a wide area of this world. There are very few Christians indeed who know the meaning of life in the Spirit. Multitudes know what life in the Christian soul is, with all its emotions, its feelings, its impulses. To know "what the Spirit saith", to know life in the Spirit, to be guided by the Spirit, to be checked up by the Spirit, for the Spirit within them to say 'No' or 'Yes' - they know very little about it; very few know anything about that. They are either guided by tradition, how it has always been done; or they are guided by some set and fixed system of truth or doctrine, by what is 'the done thing'; or they are guided by the present crystallized, organized form of Christianity, which is so rigid and established that nothing else can be allowed to have any place: if they were to deviate one hairsbreadth from the way it is done in 'Christianity', they would be wrong - they would be heretics. They are governed and guided like that. They do not know life in the Spirit.

I am not saying that life in the Spirit is a contradiction of truth, or of the Word of God, or of anything that is vital to God, but I am saying there is something more than just a set traditional system. There is such a thing as being led of the Spirit of God, and if the book of the Acts says anything, it says this, that you are not allowed to settle down into an immutable, irrevocable position, which is fixed and final.

That is one of the great movements in the book of the Acts. The Apostles were all disposed to make Jerusalem the 'headquarters' of Christianity. Jerusalem was going to be the centre of everything for the world, and so the thing was being built up and consolidated in Jerusalem. The Holy Ghost stepped in and said, 'No - headquarters are in Heaven, not down on this earth at all', and just rooted them out, drove them out from Jerusalem. They were scattered abroad everywhere. The Apostles remained there to stand by something for the Lord, but it was no longer headquarters, although they fought to have it as headquarters. For quite a time they tried to rule everything from Jerusalem, but the Holy Ghost was against them. This great world work was never afterward centred in Jerusalem.

No: the Holy Spirit is a great 'decentralizing' factor when men try to establish something on this earth. Get into the Spirit, and you do not know what is going to happen next or where you will be next. You cannot say, 'I am going to be here, or there.' The Holy Spirit has His own way: He "bloweth where he listeth" (John 3:8). That is the great truth here. Life in the Spirit is like that. You can never say, 'Well, I am going to be in such-and-such a place for so many years, and then I will change my location.' You may be altogether surprised by what the Lord will do. Even the most spiritual men in the New Testament were not given their programme in advance. They were only allowed to take their course so far, and then they were interrupted by the Holy Spirit. When they essayed or sought, the Holy Spirit suffered them not. These men are under the dominion of the Holy Spirit. He has things in hand; headquarters are in Heaven.

That is how it was, then: all things under the government of the trumpet, the voice of the Spirit.

The Corporate Relatedness of all in the Testimony

Then, further, all other things were brought into line with and made subject to this one thing - the testimony. I am impressed - as I think, if you read the book of Nehemiah again carefully, you will be impressed - with this wonderful movement. There were all the trades, all the callings, all the professions and all the positions. There were priests and there were goldsmiths and there were apothecaries and there were rulers; and it speaks of a man and his daughters, who all became stonemasons! The priest did not say, 'Oh, it is beneath my dignity to take a trowel and mortar.' The goldsmith did not say, 'I shall spoil my hands for my fine work with gold if I go and do stone-heaving.' The rulers did not say, 'Well, you ought to give me a foreman's job - I can stand by and see that it is done properly; to go down and do it myself!' Not one of them. Everyone - the priests (I was impressed with the fact that a dignitary built the Dung Gate!), goldsmiths, apothecaries, rulers, men and their daughters - all came into this work. Everything, position, vocation, qualification, was subjected to the one interest - the testimony.

I expect, when the wall was finished, they went back to their jobs; I hope they did. If the Lord does not fill your hands continually with that full ministry in His testimony that demands your separation for the time being, do not think that you do something wrong if you go back to your job. You still remain an apothecary, or a goldsmith, or whatever you may be. Paul remained a tentmaker to the end; you have no point noted in the record of his life at which he gave up making tents. He used it, apparently, alongside of the testimony, and for the testimony, all the way through. Be clear about this. Do not get that false idea about 'full-time ministry'. Be what you are. Use it for the Lord, but make it subject to the dominating interest of the Lord's testimony. That is what happened here.

In the Acts, it seems to have been like that. Although all their trades and their positions are not detailed, you have quite a considerable mention of these things in the letters of Paul, as to who people were, and what people were, and so on. But they were all gathered in, so to speak, within the 'wall': they all governed by the testimony, and everything is made to serve the testimony. No one says, 'No, I am superior, it is beneath my dignity', or, 'That is not my calling - I am called for something else.' Everybody is seeing that, no matter what they are or what their qualifications are in this world, the thing that matters more than anything else is this testimony.

In Nehemiah 3, you see coming out this beautiful feature, the corporate relatedness of all in the testimony. You notice the little phrase, so constantly recurring through that chapter - "next unto him", "next unto him", "next unto him". Now that is just the repeated statement of a fact, but you are always allowed to use your imagination when you are reading the Bible, and it will always be a good thing if you do. We have the bare fact stated, but I venture to suggest that there was probably very much spiritual history behind those facts, the history of many a personal victory. 'I do not like working alongside of him - put me next to someone more pleasant, someone I could get on with better!' The fact is just stated - "next unto him", "next unto him". For all we know, in the natural they may have been people who could never get on together at all, never work together. But they work on in this corporate relatedness, and this surely speaks of the great victory within them which the wall was to represent when it was finished.

For it was a great victory when that wall was finished. It was a great victory over all personal interests, over natural dispositions, likes and dislikes. What a victory it was in every realm! That wall was the testimony to victories in the personal life, victories in relationships - "next unto him" and "next unto him"

and "next unto him". And it may be, if you allow your imagination to go, that you would find real contradictions in the positions and qualifications and callings of these people who were next to one another. I will not say what I could say there, as to who might be alongside of the other, but looked at from the world it was a glorious mix-up: there was nothing that tallied - priests and goldsmiths and apothecaries and so on, nobles and commoners, all working together alongside of one another. It was no mix-up at all. It was a glorious harmony, because of the victory in their own hearts. What a grand testimony!

Come to your New Testament. How true that was in those first days in the first chapters of the Acts! Personal interests set aside; people of different positions, different qualifications, different outlooks on life, different constitutions and temperaments, were all brought together. Is not that band of twelve men, the nucleus, a glorious and marvelous proof of a mighty victory inside? When you think of what they were naturally, and how they had been before - how they had quarrelled with one another, argued with one another, disputed with one another as to who should be first, and so on - and yet now they stand together; they are as one man. Something has happened, there has been a victory inside, to make this "next unto him" relationship true. When the Apostle Paul brings before us the fullness of God's thought as to His Church, he presents that relationship so beautifully in his picture of the Body of Christ, with the relatedness and inter-relatedness of its members. Every part is in the place appointed by the Lord, and working in relation to every other part. Oh, for this victory in the Lord's people! This will be a testimony - no jealousies, no rivalries, no criticisms, no malice, no personal considerations or feelings; nothing of this kind at all. The Lord's interests come first. The testimony to the Lord Jesus rules all these things out.

Let us ask the Lord to give us a mind like this, to come under this pervading influence of the Holy Spirit, this passion of God, for such a testimony. And let us take the practical aspects of it very seriously to heart. It means all that we have been saying. Again I appeal to you to get away from the types, the figures, the illustrations, to the practical spiritual realities. We are called, in the grace of God, at least to add something to that which has been the Lord's concern through the ages - the bringing of the testimony nearer completion; but in every age the same principles are involved, the same features must characterize - all these things must be true.

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