

Articles and Sermons :: One of the Greatest Needs by T. Austin Sparks

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by T. Austin Sparks

One of the greatest needs of our time is to plough our way down through the heavy and tangled growth of Christian doctrines to the virgin soil of spiritual life and reality. A master-stroke of the great subverter, in his purpose to neutralise spiritual effectiveness against his kingdom, has been the resolving of Christianity into an endless system or series of doctrines, most of them in conflict with each other. By these Christianity has been crippled and frustrated, turned in on itself, and a state of civil (or uncivil) war has been created.

The Church cannot move, as an integrated and single-fronted body, against a very powerful and wily foe, because it does not believe together; its mind is divided into so many conflicting interpretations.

This means that authority has almost entirely disappeared. Men have repeatedly tried to correct this by forming creeds, confessions of faith, principles and practice, etc., but these only serve to form groups, widen breaches, harden antagonisms, create superiorities, and foster complacencies; they never solve the problem of spiritual dividedness. They engender suspicion, breathe an atmosphere of fear, and stimulate a mentality of heresy.

All this is due to certain fundamental weaknesses and defectivenesses in Christian life. One of these is a wholly objective approach to Christian truth.

There are two aspects of this.

(a) The exhausting of truth as such, so that a state of saturation and finality is reached, and the whole matter is reduced to the best text-book, manual, 'authority' or 'classic' on the subject. Book succeeds book, and the matter is covered, embodied and compassed in a library.

Do you want to know what is the fullest presentation of any given 'truth'? So-and-so and such-and-such is the answer. It is in book form. That is 'the last word'. If someone has something 'fresh' or 'original' or a bit off the beaten and well-worn track, he is either suspect or creates a vogue which obtains for a time and then falls into line or passes out. Generally, that sort of thing is just not allowed.

(b) But an even deeper and more serious aspect of this objective approach is the immense cleavage between the verbal statement of truth and the inward illumination.

Here traditional, spiritual Christianity is in violent dividedness, bitter conflict, and complete confusion. In this dividedness an extreme position is taken by one side. The Bible says so-and-so. It just says that, in actual words. Unless it is obviously and unmistakably parable, simile, symbol, allegory, or figure, it must be taken just as it stands. All that it means is on the surface of the simple verbal expression. There is no place or allowance for any interpretation, deeper, fuller, or other meaning than that which is conveyed by the words themselves. In the realm where this is the beginning and end of the whole matter, positively no place is allowed for any fuller light, other meaning, or clearer understanding. As a consequence of this rigid attitude no new experience of fuller or clearer illumination is tolerated, but is at once written off as dangerous.

We know of a 'Faith Mission' (so-called) which demanded the resignation of any of its missionaries or staff who claimed to have any new experience based upon a new revelation of Christian truth. In this way it is trying to safeguard itself against certain 'isms'.

It is true that the Scriptures themselves forbid 'private interpretations', 'wresting the Scriptures', "handling the word of God deceitfully". It is also true that a very different and much better situation would exist in Christianity if Christians took more careful note of, and gave more implicit obedience to, just what the Scriptures say. We are often shocked and appalled that Christians who have the Bible can so easily violate its so clearly stated injunctions. If the Bible is read at all by vast numbers of Christians it surely is read far too objectively!

But, given that there should be a meticulous observance of the letter of the Word, is that all?

Of course we have no sympathy with any position that is above the Word. If, for instance, the Bible says that "if a man does not work he shall not eat", there is no spiritual getting round that by an able-bodied person. That must be taken literally! It is dangerous and pernicious to be "spiritually" above the clear statements of God's Word, just as much as to ignore them. Many have their spiritual life strangled, thwarted, arrested, limited, because they do not, or will not obey the Lord in some clear statement of His Word.

But when all that can be said along that line has been said, is it not also a dangerous, harmful, and mistaken thing to reduce the life of the child of God to a merely mechanical, automatic, "penny-in-the-slot" kind of thing? That is, to exclude the possibility that the Scriptures - in whole or part - have a meaning which is either more or other than we have seen? To take the position that we have the true and full meaning at first sight and in the words employed to convey truth? If it were not the case, it would be hard to believe that many Christians, and among them leaders, do take such a position. To such it is heresy to speak of fuller light, illumination or "revelation" as to what the Scriptures contain or mean. Such people forbid any "experience" based upon such illumination, but what a static and coldly legal Christian life theirs must be! We do not overlook a much more thoroughgoing "study" of Scripture, with "aids" and comparings, but whether it be little or much, the ultimate issue is the difference between an intellectual approach and Holy Spirit enlightenment.

Well, with the fullest recognition of the perils of any position carried to an extreme, one way or the other, we are compelled to face some facts. These lie in two directions: (a) in the Bible itself; (b) in the history of God's ways since. But before we do this let us say that we know how impossible it is for us to resolve by argument the problem with which we commenced this editorial. We shall come to the true solution presently.

The outstanding illustration and example of the defectiveness of holding the verbal presentation of Scripture without spiritual illumination is surely Israel.

The Hebrew Prophets are just full of this failure; indeed, it might be said that this is both the heart and the sum of their ministry. This long history headed up to and became the root-cause of the crucifixion of Jesus. It was this "blindness" that He was encountering all the days of His ministry. It is a searching and challenging statement, with extended significance, that -

"They that dwell in Jerusalem, and their rulers, because they knew... not... the voices of the prophets which are read every sabbath, fulfilled them by condemning him... and... asked... of Pilate that he should be slain" (Acts 13:27, 28).

Then to take another instance. This holding of the Scriptures without inner illumination was the explanation of the breakdown, scattering, offence, and disconsolateness of the disciples after the crucifixion. They had the Scriptures. Jesus did not give them the Bible as something of which they had never heard. They knew their Bibles in an objective way. But it is a solemn fact that their kind of Bible knowledge did not mean anything to them in the day of the fiery ordeal. "Selah" - think of that!

See the two representatives of the rest on the Emmaus road. What the Lord did was not to give them the Scriptures, but to "open their understanding that they might understand" them. That was an experience! That made all the difference!

To go on with the instances. Was there a man who had a better knowledge of and devotion to the Scriptures than "Saul of Tarsus"? It was this very thing that accounted for his vehement antagonism to Jesus and His followers. But listen to his later confession:

"I verily thought... that I ought to do many things contrary to the name of Jesus of Nazareth" (Acts 26:9).

There is much more like this from Paul. But, again, it is a solemn reflection that it is possible to be so utterly wrong while believing that we are in line with Scripture.

One more instance in the Bible. No less a person than Peter himself had a big crisis on this very issue. His controversy with the Lord - a bit of the old Peter - over "unclean things" and "going in to eat with Gentiles" was based upon his apprehension of the Scripture of Leviticus 11, an absolutely governing Scripture for Jews. That that Scripture, in the meaning that Jews, including Peter commonly gave to it, did not hold good in heaven, at least since the Cross, is implicit and unmistakable in the voice accompanying and ending the vision of Acts 10. And yet Peter could find his scriptural support for saying: "Not so, Lord". It could have been disastrous to his apostleship and ministry if he had stuck to his own app

revelation of Scripture. What an immense thing issued from the revolutionary new light that came to him. It was indeed a new experience!

Through the ages, when God has moved on in His purposes, a new development has so often been based upon a new illumination or revelation of His word. So often such has been quite revolutionary in the life of those concerned, and they have not hesitated to refer to it as a revelation from God, although, of course, never extra to the Scriptures, but only as to their content and meaning.

So it was with such men as Dr. A. T. Pierson, Dr. Hudson Taylor, Bishop Handley Moule.

In the case of Dr. Pierson, he had been brought up, trained, and ordained in a certain interpretation of Scripture, and spent half of his life teaching and practising accordingly, gaining considerable eminence in that connection. In mid-life, or after, he received what he referred to as new light, and said that 'God has shown me'. This related to a fundamental interpretation of much in the Scriptures. This new light and altogether different interpretation (the exact opposite to his old conviction and teaching) cost him his church, his denomination, and favour in his whole erstwhile realm; but it led to a new and world-wide ministry, which was the ministry for which he is known by so many of God's people and is extant in his books.

As to Dr. Hudson Taylor: it will go without any argument that he would know as well as anyone the fifteenth chapter of John's Gospel. But it was when God gave him a new revelation of the inner meaning of that Scripture that, leaping into a new experience, he was saved from the darkest time, and the work of God went on. The story can be read in the monumental *Life*, in the chapter called 'The Exchanged Life'.

Dr. Handley Moule's association with the 'Keswick' testimony is well-known and his ministry therefrom has enriched multitudes. But remember - that association was born of a big battle on the Scriptures, and Dr. Moule was no novice in that realm. Only by new and revolutionary light on the Word did he come into the 'experience' and the resultant ministry.

And so we could repeat the story in numerous instances. That 'The Lord has yet more light and truth to break forth from His Word' is not disputed by many, but sometimes the breaking forth may prove revolutionary for one whose apprehension has been quite mistaken.

Let us here pause to say that this issue is not really one of alternatives i.e. between the literal statements of Scripture and the spiritual meaning. It is really the balance between the objective and the subjective. The loss of this balance on either side is the cause of the loss of very much real value and effectiveness. That the 'letter' is not all has the very authority of Christ Himself behind the statement.

That it is possible to have a new revelation, extra to and apart from the Scripture, no one ought to believe. But to have 'a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him' is Scripture for Christians.

We have not even yet reached the very heart of this whole matter. We commenced by saying that a great need of our time is to break through the matted tangle of systematized doctrine to the soil of life. How can this be done, and what does it really mean?

The answer lies in a return to spiritual life. This is a return from the merely intellectual, traditional, and 'accepted' school-realm of Christian interpretation of our construction of the Scriptures, to what the Lord meant when He said: 'The words that I have spoken unto you are spirit, and are life.'

Alongside of that He said: 'It is the spirit that quickeneth; the flesh profiteth nothing'.

The 'flesh' surely is the unilluminated natural mind of 1 Corinthians 2. This constitutes an impasse, Paul says; and it is illustrated and demonstrated in Nicodemus, 'the teacher in Israel', when it came to 'heavenly things' (John 3).

This impasse obtains and remains for all who know nothing of the indwelling, inward illumination of the anointing Spirit - the Teacher within. Those whose only approach to the Scriptures is objective are thus handicapped.

Did Jesus say of the coming Spirit: 'He shall guide you into all the truth'? Surely to be guided into all the truth is something more than having the truth presented, conveyed, and written down!

Did Paul pray for believers that they might be given 'a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him' (i.e. Christ)? Surely that is an imparted faculty, ability, in the believer, and more than natural equipment!

Did John write: “The anointing which ye received abideth in you, and... teacheth you concerning all things”? Surely - this is an inward activity of the Holy Spirit, and more than the result of reading the Bible without that work!

The only hope for oneness of mind and spiritual authority in the Church is the absolute Lordship and mastery of mind, heart and will by the Holy Spirit; a crucified selfhood in all these respects. This is life, power, assurance, and impact upon the world.

It is the return to or discovery of the life in the Spirit. “The Lord is the Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty”. “The veil is taken away”. “In that day ye shall know” - “When he, the Spirit of truth, is come”.