

The Dispensation of the Holy Spirit

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Chapter 1 - "Neither... Nor... But..."

"Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall ye worship the Father... But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth: for such doth the Father seek to be his worshippers. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and truth" ([Joh 4:20-21](#); [Joh 4:23](#); [Joh 4:24](#)).

That is our basic passage for this time, and we are going to gather some other passages around it:

"But unto the place which the Lord your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put his name there, even unto his habitation shall ye seek, and thither thou shalt come... then it shall come to pass that the place which the Lord your God shall choose to cause his name to dwell there, thither shall ye bring all that I command you; ...If the place which the Lord thy God shall choose to put his name there be too far from thee, then thou shalt kill of thy herd and of thy flock, which the Lord hath given thee, as I have commanded thee, and thou shalt eat within thy gates, after all the desire of thy soul" ([Deu 12:5](#); [Deu 12:11](#); [Deu 12:21](#)).

"For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" ([Mat 18:20](#)).

"Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit... and lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the age" ([Mat 28:19-20](#)).

"Do not they blaspheme the honourable name by which ye are called?" ([Jas 2:7](#)). The marginal - alternative to the latter phrase is: "the honourable name which was called upon you".

"That the residue of men may seek after the Lord, and all the nations, upon whom my name is called" ([Act 15:17](#)).

Now back to the Gospel by John: and before we come to the particular matter which is to occupy us at this time, there are one or two quite simple, yet I think very helpful things to point out.

The Significance of Individuals

This Gospel, as you know, is very largely a story of individual contacts with the Lord Jesus. There is quite a series of such personal and individual contacts with the Lord Jesus, or contacts of the Lord Jesus with them, recorded in this Gospel. It is very instructive and very helpful to note the use of individuals and of individual history which the Lord made and took up, to provide some of the most significant things that He ever said. We are not going, of course, to follow this through, but I want to point it out, because I feel that it holds something of great value for you and for me.

You will recall some of these individuals, the first of whom was Nathanael. That interview between the Lord and Nathanael produced something very wonderful. The Lord took up that man's history and used it for values which continue to this very time. We will leave that for the moment.

Next was Nicodemus - and everybody knows about Nicodemus! How the Lord took up that man's personal history and used it for tremendous purpose, very great value. Everybody will agree that that part of the Gospel which is now marked off as chapter 3, if it were taken out of the Bible, would represent a very great loss indeed. But you must remember that all that we have in that wonderful so-called third chapter of John, so rich, so full, so deep, is the product of the contact of the Lord with an individual. The Lord is taking hold of one person's spiritual life and history and using it.

You come next to that which is going to engage our attention especially at this time, in what is marked as chapter 4: this woman of Samaria. What an interview! And what a lot the Lord made of that woman's history! What a lot came out when that woman, who might never have become a part of history on record, came into touch with the Lord Jesus! And it was all because He came into touch with her. It was a tremendous thing. A person like that, of so little worth and account amongst the people of this world. She would be utterly despised, ignored, set aside. But because the Lord Jesus came into touch with that life she is on record for two thousand years, and we don't know how much longer - certainly for eternity.

We pass from chapter 4 to that poor fellow at the Pool of Bethesda. Indeed, he was a neglected man. He was not counted of much significance. Everybody forced their way in front of him and pushed him into the back, out of sight and out of account. But when the Lord Jesus touched that man's life he comes into history.

And so you go on, coming on to the man born blind - and what a story that is, occupying this large section covered by the whole of chapters 8 and 9! There is the man - and you know what the people of the day thought about him! As the story unfolds you see that they had not much room for him. Indeed, they said: "Thou wast altogether born in sins, and dost thou teach us?" ([Joh 9:34](#)). 'Who are you to have anything to say at all? How dare you!' Well, that was the value of that man in their eyes. But the Lord Jesus came into touch with that life, and here he is - one of the Bible characters. And when the Bible takes up a person that is no small thing, is it? The Bible gives eternal values.

And through you go until you come to Lazarus. Here is another individual - and what an immense thing that the Lord came into touch with a man in a little village some five or six miles,

or perhaps less, outside Jerusalem, and in that little home! It is an immortal story, but is made that because the Lord Jesus touched that life.

Now, I think you see the point. There are tremendous values to be taken up and carried on from any life and any personal history when the Lord Jesus really gets His hand on that life. It is a simple thing, but very encouraging. If all these people were amongst the world's great and recognized and honourable, well, our hearts would sink and we would say: 'All right - but that does not apply to me.' But when you take up some of these people, at least (even if you are not an important Nicodemus), the thing still applies because it is just what the Lord is doing now. And all I am wanting to say about this at the outset is that it is something to note in this Gospel: that when the Lord Jesus gets His hand upon a life - and it may be an insignificant life - and when He gets His hand upon a man or a woman, who may be of no account, humanly speaking, He makes eternal history out of that life. He lays hold of their own history and turns it into His history. That is tremendous! Your history, perhaps, could not be poorer than that of the woman of Samaria or that man at the Pool of Bethesda, but He will take hold of it and turn it into the history of Jesus Christ. That is what it amounts to.

Well, that is something to begin with. But another thing I would have you note is what Jesus said to these people. Not only His touch upon their lives, but what He said. You know, dear friends, we have not yet fathomed the depths of what Jesus said to any of these people. That is no exaggeration - it is quite true.

To Nathanael: "Ye shall see the heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man" ([Joh 1:51](#)). Have you fathomed that? Have you exhausted that? I am coming back to that in a moment.

To Nicodemus: Oh, what shall we say about all these things that the Lord Jesus said to Nicodemus? About the work of the Holy Spirit in new birth, the nature of new birth - "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit" ([Joh 3:6](#)) - and all the other things. And what tremendous things they were! You and I have not exhausted them. I just wonder how many sermons have been preached on [Joh 3:16](#) in the last two thousand years, and still they are doing it! And it is very rarely that exactly the same thing is said over and over again. There is always something new and something more. Then: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness..." and so on. Perhaps the profoundest thing that He said to Nicodemus was: "If I told you earthly things and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you heavenly things?" ([Joh 3:12](#)). Things beyond the capacity and possibility of the learned man in Israel! That is what it amounts to. Have you fathomed that? Have you got to the bottom of that?

Now, my point is that wealth like that is brought out of a touch with an individual. The hand of the Lord Jesus upon an individual can bring all that out.

And what about this woman of Samaria and the things the Lord Jesus said to her? We are going to see something of that, because we shall be focusing upon that particularly.

And so you go on - and how true it is in the case of Lazarus! For it was out of this episode of Lazarus that there came that mighty statement: "I am the resurrection and the life" ([Joh 11:25](#)). Resurrection and life: not some thing or some happening, but a Person. We have never fathomed that yet! The Church has been drawing upon that for these many centuries, and you and I should be drawing upon it. Some of us have been doing so for many years unto living experience - the Resurrection and the Life as a Person indwelling us, now, here. The rebuke, you notice, was to the sister of Lazarus. She said: "I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection

at the last day" ([Joh 11:24](#)). Are you putting it to the future? Are you making it something remote from the present? "I am". There may be a great resurrection day, but for spiritual values resurrection and life are a present experience to be drawn upon every day.

I say that these are wonderful things that the Lord Jesus said to these individuals. I want to make this application because I feel it is quite right to do so. It is not error, not false, and not a mistake to say that the Lord Jesus is making history by His hand being upon us. And if He can get His hand upon us He will draw out spiritual values from these lives which will be for the good of His people. Just as these people were made to produce these values of light and revelation and truth and power for the church for all the ages, so, in a measure and in a sense, the Lord can draw values out of your life and mine for His people, beyond anything that we could produce - but for that hand of God upon us. Have you got hold of that? Is it not helpful? It is encouraging.

Well, when we have said that - and you can see that it is a good field in which to work quite profitably - we come to this particular case of the woman at Samaria to learn something from these words which we have read in [John 4](#).

The Great Contrasts

I want to focus your attention upon these contrasting words: "Neither... nor... but". "Neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem... but in spirit and truth." Not this, nor that, but... Not here, nor there, but... That is the heart of things here. Now let us analyse this whole statement. "The hour cometh, and now is." The hour? The hour has arrived. That word 'hour', as you probably know, is used in different ways in the New Testament. It is used literally of the hour of sixty minutes. It is also used in the same way as the word 'day' is used - of a dispensation: "In that day" ([Joh 16:23](#)), referring to some longer period of time than twelve hours. It is a dispensational day. In the same way as 'day' is used figuratively, so the Lord was using here the word 'hour'. "The hour cometh, and now is" - it has arrived. A new dispensational period has come. It is here. Note that.

All this is very much in keeping with the way in which the Lord used this phrase: "In that day", when He was speaking about the coming of the Holy Spirit. The 'hour' and 'day' are identical in the Lord's meaning.

Now, what is this day that had come with the Lord Jesus but the coming of the Lord Jesus Himself? He says it quite emphatically: a new day, or a new hour, has come. We have now entered upon a new period in this world's history. What is it? Of course, as to the actual period, it is undoubtedly from the first advent of the Lord Jesus to His coming again. That is the dispensational new day, or hour, to which the Lord Jesus referred. He was saying, in effect: 'My coming into this world has introduced a new period, a clearly marked-off period, in the history of this world, and that period is bounded by My first coming and My last coming.' That is the day, dispensationally. But that is just a statement of simple fact.

Dear friends, most of the errors, the confusions, the contradictions that abound in Christianity are due largely to the failure to recognize and accept the essential change which has come with this particular dispensation. It is not necessary for me to dwell upon the errors and confusions and contradictions that abound in Christianity. The state of things! Sometimes it appalls us, sometimes it perplexes us, and sometimes it makes us ashamed, this thing called 'Christianity' in general, as we know it. And I repeat: A very large proportion of all that which is a contradiction to Christ is due to the failure to recognize and accept the immense change in dispensation that has come about with the advent of the Lord Jesus. That is a statement which we must follow up.

We used the word 'dispensation'. It is a New Testament word, and is, in itself, illuminating. The Apostle Paul used it four times. It is a Greek word, 'oikos', which means 'the house', and 'oikonomia' is the order of the house, that is, the regime that exists in the house. If yours is a proper house, home, or establishment, there is an order about it. That is, you have a time when you get up in the morning, and, if you are properly ordered, you have a proper time for getting up. You don't get up at any time: you have a certain time. And then you have breakfast at a certain time. That is your order. And then the day in your house is so ordered. This is the way you do it, and if some stranger were to come and begin to interfere, changing your times and ways of doing things, you would, I think, raise a good deal of trouble! You would say: 'Look here, this is not the way we do it here. Please don't interfere with our household arrangements.' You may be more or less jealous about it. Some people, of course, are just careless, but in a careless establishment there are all sorts of difficulties and troubles. You know quite well that it is the well-ordered house, or home, that makes the best progress, gets on with the least friction, and gets the most done, saving the most time.

That is the meaning of this word 'dispensation', or 'oikonomia': the order of the house. With the coming of the Lord Jesus, and of the Holy Spirit, which two things are one in effect and meaning, as we shall see, the order of the house has been changed. The order in the Old Testament was one order, and the order in the New Testament is an entirely different order. The house order, or regime, has been completely changed. I have said that if somebody comes in and begins to change the order in your home there is usually trouble, and that is exactly what happened in the New Testament. Tremendous battles and troubles arose because the Old Testament order was being upset and put aside. Look at it - again and again! Paul's whole life was a battle on this matter. He was the man who used this word 'house order', or 'dispensation' and because he was now recognizing and accepting the setting aside of the whole Mosaic order, the order of the law, and was pointing to the new order that had come in with the Holy Spirit, what a time he had everywhere! His battle for Galatia, for instance, focused upon this very thing - the change in the order from the old to the new. That wonderful Letter to the Hebrews was written on this very thing. There is an order in the Old Testament of angel messengers, of priests, of sacrifices, of covenants, and so on. The writer says: 'That order is finished. A new order has come in with Christ' - "God... hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son" ([Heb 1:1-2](#)), and this is the new order that has been introduced. A heavenly order, not an earthly one. The old one was earthly, but the new is a heavenly one.

May I repeat, at the risk of tiring you, that it is failure to recognize and accept that that lies right at the root of most of our troubles. There are many people who are still living on a pre-Pentecost basis, trying to live an Old Testament kind of order in a New Testament day, and it does not fit with the Holy Spirit. There are many people who are living on a sub-New Testament basis. altogether below this, and not coming up to the high standard and level of this new order that has come in. There are some people who are trying to combine both, and the result is terrible confusion.

You can leave that if you don't understand and cannot follow what I mean, but it is all an emphasis upon this: the necessity for a recognizing and accepting of this tremendous change that has taken place in the dispensation, in the house order, by the coming of the Lord Jesus and of the Holy Spirit.

The Nature of the New Order

There is no doubt, to come back to this fourth chapter of John, that Jesus was speaking to this woman of Samaria about the day or the hour of this new order. He spoke to her about the water

which He would give, about the well which would be opened, and the stream within, about the life which He would give - but it is always with a forward glance and a forward look. He is thinking of that hour when the Holy Spirit would come, and this really did take place. The well was opened within, was it not? The spring welled up within when the Holy Spirit came, and the life was within at that time. He was looking forward to that, just as in chapter 16 He was saying: 'In that day when the Spirit is come.' I repeat, there is no doubt that the Lord was speaking to this woman about what He was calling 'the hour'. He said: 'This has been inaugurated by My coming, but now I am going to tell you what it will be like, what that new hour is like.'

But let us note - and this, dear friends, is the foundation of it all - that this new dispensation, this new order of things, is a spiritual dispensation. That is the thing the Lord has been trying to emphasize. That is what He meant with Nathanael. It was a figurative way of speaking: "Hereafter" - that is, when this hour is come - "ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man" ([Joh 1:51](#)). What is meant by that? Are we to take it literally? We know what it means - that Jesus Christ is the way of communication between heaven and earth, between us and God. That it is by Him, through Him and in Him that heaven and earth are united. We here are united with heaven, and all the communications of God, by the Holy Spirit, with us are in Christ. We understand something of that, don't we? But that requires this new order.

Nicodemus: Is this a new spiritual dispensation? Yes, Nicodemus could not understand it. "How can a man be born when he is old? ...That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." That is the new order. It is a new spiritual regime that is introduced in this hour, this dispensation. It is the dispensation of the Spirit, and, therefore, it is a spiritual dispensation.

And that is what He is saying to this woman. This hour, this dispensational hour, lasting all these centuries, is a spiritual order of things.

You focus, you see, right down on this: 'The hour... neither... nor... but'. 'Our fathers worshipped in this mountain, and they have always said that if you want to meet God you have to come to Mount Gerizim and our Samaritan temple, for that is where you will meet Him. You Jews say: If you want to meet God you must come to the temple in Jerusalem and that is where you will meet Him.' Jesus said: 'Neither... nor' - just wiping out the whole thing. By one sweep of the hand dismissing the whole old order and bringing in an entirely new one and telling you what it is. Yes, it is the new order of the Spirit. And it is not focused locally at all, in the way that you are going to be bound by any localization of this thing, but "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them". That is the new order. In [Joh 3:16](#) it is: "whosoever believeth", wiping out all racial distinctions, all geographical limitations, all differences here on this earth, with a great 'whosoever': throwing that at Nicodemus, who said: 'No. Israel are the chosen people, the elect, the special people, the spiritual aristocracy. No, no!' ... "Whosoever, Nicodemus!"

That is what came out in [Acts 15](#): "All the nations, upon whom my name is called" - "Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name" - "Gathered together in my name". That is [Joh 3:16](#) - "Whosoever".

And in [Mat 18:20](#) it is 'wheresoever'. This is not a matter of geography, of certain structures, edifices, places, kinds of meeting-places, or anything temporal at all. It is nothing of this earth. 'Neither... nor... but in the Spirit.' This is a spiritual dispensation, and everything that belongs to this dispensation is a spiritual thing.

In the Old Testament it was the old house order. If you are going to have a tabernacle it is going to be a temporal, earthly thing, made with hands. If you are going to have priests with their vestments, their beautiful garments, and Levites, and all the system of sacrifices and feasts and orders down here - well; that has gone for ever with the coming of the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit. What is the new house order? Are there going to be people in the Lord's house who minister, serve? Be very careful of how you use that word 'office' - 'holding office' - for in this new order there is nothing official. Everything is spiritual, and everyone who ministers, everyone who serves and everyone who has any place and does anything, does so because they are spiritual men and women, and on no other ground at all. The measure of their spirituality is the measure of their usefulness to the Lord, and nothing else. 'Oh, but in the New Testament' - you say - 'we are told about elders and others. Are we not to recognize that?' Here again I would remind you that in the places where the Apostle Paul speaks most about these things, he is doing it correctively, not provisionally, because things at the end of his life were already taking that ecclesiastical form where they were introducing the kind of system of priesthood that we know so well today in Christianity. It was coming in then at the end of Paul's life. It was not so long after he went from this earth that you have the Book of the Revelation and the messages to the churches, and if the Lord lays Himself out to hit with great force against anything in those letters, it is against formalism. When Paul begins to speak to Timothy about elders in the church, he is saying: 'These men must be spiritual men.' And you see what he calls 'spiritual men'! He is not saying: 'These must be ecclesiastics, and important, religious figures in the religious world.' No, he is saying: 'They must be spiritual men.' He is getting back to the real essence of this whole new order, the House of God, and the real nature of it is spiritual.

The Church and the Churches

That is very important, dear friends. What is the Church, and what are the churches? It is just this - nothing less and nothing more than this: the aggregate of those upon whom the Name has been called whether it be two, or three, or more... 'Where I put My Name, there will I meet you'... "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them". That is the Church: nothing less than that and nothing more than that. 'Neither... nor... but in the Spirit', and wheresoever that happens, there the Church is, in essence, in principle.

There is nothing legal about this at all. It is a spiritual matter entirely. And so everything else to do with this new order is spiritual. That is what the Lord is saying to this woman.

But do you know, dear friends, that in these things that the Lord said to these individuals He was only planting a seed? Here is the seed dropped into the ground. What is the history of that seed? If it is a normal history it will not come back as a single seed, but in a multiplication of seeds. From that one there will be many, it may be a whole host. The Lord Jesus dropped the seed principle into these individual lives, and the rest of the New Testament is the development of that seed. What I mean is this: Here you have something in germ form, and in the rest of the New Testament you have all the meaning in that developing, and you can trace from the later part all the enlarged teaching and revelation... 'Oh, this is what the Lord said!'

The Heavens Opened

I have pointed this out with Nathanael... "the heaven opened". Oh, what a wonderful thing it is for you and for me, dear friends, that through Calvary heaven is opened to us! I don't mean that we are going to heaven. That is quite all right and true, but now, here in this place, we have an open heaven. There is a way through. The communication is going on in Christ because He is here, the great Ladder - if I may say so - between heaven and earth, between God and us, the

communication of the Spirit is going on with us in this very place. We can be here all night under an opened heaven, with the blessed communications of the Spirit to our hearts, because heaven is no longer closed against us. Calvary has rent the heaven for us. Just as the veil of the temple was rent from top to bottom when Jesus died, so the way is opened into the Most Holy for us now.

I repeat: We say these things, but what an immensity there is in a simple thing said to Nathanael! Something that you did not quite understand, but you come into spiritual life and you know what it means to have an opened heaven... Do you? Do you know what personal communication from heaven into your heart means? Do you know what personal communication direct with heaven from your heart means? Why, that is the birthright of the child of God! That is why it is the first thing in the Gospel by John, for an opened heaven is the first thing that a child of God comes into. And that heaven, as in Christ, is for us, because of the rent heaven. But you want all the rest of the New Testament to explain that, and that is what it does.

It is the same with the words to Nicodemus, and to this woman, and to all the others who are here. It was put in a simple, symbolic way to these people by the Lord Jesus, but though He puts these things in that way, He never reduces them to anything less than the eternal measure of value and meaning. When the Lord Jesus said something, there was vastly more in what He said than anyone ever recognized at the time. I give you a simple example. We are perhaps more familiar with what is called the parable of the Prodigal Son than with any other story in the Bible. Take a fragment from that. The Lord Jesus is telling this story, using this illustration about this son, his father and his home, and when at last He gets that son to the point of returning home to the father, what is it that the Lord Jesus puts into the mouth of that son? Note: it is only a part of the whole, but it is a very interesting and significant part... "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight" ([Luk 15:21](#)). What might He have made him say if He had just been talking in an ordinary man's language? 'Father, I made a mistake and did wrong. I have suffered for it and have had a miserable time, and I have lost everything. Have pity on me!' That is not good enough for God! Sin is sin, and sin is against heaven, and sin is something before God. Jesus never confused and confounded these great principles by just reducing them to a human story. "I have sinned" - and sin is against heaven, an affront and an offence to heaven, and sin is against God, an insult to God. He made the son say that, and do you see what I mean? When the Lord Jesus says something, it sounds very simple, but there is the profundity of eternity in anything that He says.

And so He said to this woman: "Neither... nor... but" - and in that 'but' there is the whole dispensation in spirit and in truth, and the whole nature of this new order. The whole nature of the Church, of all the Church's functions and service and everything, is - what? It is a spiritual order, and we will only get into terrible confusion, spoil everything, and make any amount of trouble if we try to bring this down to some earthly thing, earthly system, earthly order, some (as brother Nee used to say) earth touch. It is death. That is the explanation. Keep everything in the Spirit and out of touch with this accursed world, and there is life, there is progress, and there is growth.

The Dispensation of the Holy Spirit

by T. Austin-Sparks

Chapter 2 - Its Nature

In the first message of this series we laid the Scriptural foundation with [Joh 4:21](#); [Joh 4:23](#), [Mat 18:20](#), [Mat 28:19-20](#) and [Act 15:17](#). We concentrated our attention upon the very great significance of three words spoken by our Lord to the Samaritan woman in the context of the great transition: "The hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and in truth... God is a spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and truth." In that context Jesus used these three words: "Neither" (in Samaria), "Nor" (at Jerusalem), "But" (in spirit and truth).

We pointed out that this indicates, and postulates, first, a change of dispensations; second, a change of order; and third, a change of nature. "Neither... nor" dismisses one dispensation with its form and order. "But" introduces a new and other order and nature.

Before proceeding to the new nature of worship inaugurated by the coming of God's Son, Jesus Christ, we must lay further stress upon this change. To a very large extent this challenges Christendom and Christianity as it exists now. The very words used by Jesus above carry with them such a challenge: "Spirit and truth". Can we deny that He implied - at least implied that what had obtained as represented by the Samaritan temple in Mount Gerizim, and the Jewish temple in Jerusalem, was not "Spirit and truth", but, at most, a type, a figure, and a man-made representation? It was form, not spirit; it was artificial, not true. An immense amount of the New Testament opens up when we get this [Joh 4:21](#); [Joh 4:23](#) key intelligently into our possession by the Holy Spirit. Our minds faint in the presence of so much, and we feel confronted with an impossible task as we contemplate coping with it. We can do no more than give hints and indications. May the Holy Spirit do the rest!

In the first place, we must remind ourselves that Jesus said of Himself that He is the Truth. He said also: "To this end have I been born, and to this end am I come into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth heareth my voice" ([Joh 18:37](#)). By implication He said that He was the true Temple ([Joh 2:19](#)). In contrast with the Jewish 'false shepherds' He said that He was the true Shepherd. In contrast with the old Israel as the Vine ([Psa 8:8-16](#), [Isa 5:1-7](#), [Jer 2:21](#)) He said "I am the true Vine."

This conception of truth in relation to His own person and work is one of the major features of His coming into the world. If we take up this word in its seventeen occurrences in John's Gospel alone we cannot fail to be immensely impressed. Then follow it through into John's Letters; and finally see it in the great consummation in the Revelation - "The faithful and true". Paul speaks of the truth - "As truth is in Jesus" ([Eph 4:21](#)). Jesus, as the Truth, is contrasted with Satan, the liar. But He is also contrasted with all representations, types, symbols, outward forms, etc., which were - and are - not the true, the real. When our Lord spoke of His body as the Temple, deliberately refraining from the fuller explanation because of the fixed prejudice of His hearers, He introduced the great truth of the transition from one dispensation to another, and the complete change in the nature of temple and worship. It was because Stephen saw this and declared it that he was murdered by these very people. Said he: "The Most High dwelleth not in houses made with hands" ([Act 7:48](#)). Paul said the same to the Athenians ([Act 17:24](#)). This does not mean that God never came into representations when they wholly corresponded with His thought. Both the Tabernacle and the Temple were "made with hands" and God came into them in power and glory, but not to commit Himself to the thing. The time came when He forsook both and He was no longer found there. They were only temporary representations and His presence was conditional. The "true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man" ([Heb 8:2](#)) is "not of this creation". The whole Letter to the Hebrews has to do with this change from the earthly and temporal to the heavenly and spiritual. Hence, He is no longer in "temples made with hands".

To come right to the point: the New Testament teaches that the Temple in this dispensation is a Person, and persons incorporated into Him through death, burial and resurrection, and 'baptized into one body by one Spirit' ([1Co 12:13](#)). We must also remember that Jesus foretold the passing away of that entire temporal system, with Jerusalem as its centre and representation. This actually came to pass, and it has not been recovered so far as Jewry is concerned. That Letter to the Hebrews takes up the prophecy of Haggai ([HagGal 2:6](#); [Gal 2:21](#)) wherein is predicted a two-fold shaking of all things with a view to testing their temporal or eternal nature; and [Heb 12:27](#) says that only the things which cannot be shaken will remain. This is a kind of summary of the Letter. The things which can - and will be - shaken are the figures, representations of heavenly things, the "things made with hands". The things which cannot be shaken are the spiritual, the heavenly; which are the true!

May it not be (and we put it in question form just to draw consideration), may it not be that we are now really in the universal shaking? There are large realms in which it is being said, and believed, that Christianity has failed. In Christendom there are many who have abandoned faith in the old teaching and beliefs of Christianity. There is a great sifting and falling away. There is an intense testing of all who are in any way connected with Christianity. Yes, 'shaking' is the right word, both as to things earthly and things heavenly. The issue will be just as to what is true, and what is otherwise; what is really of the Spirit, and what is of man, tradition, and outward form.

If this great shaking is going to head up to what Peter said, with prophetic illumination as to the nuclear age, "the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall be dissolved with fervent heat, and the earth and the works that are therein shall be burned up... these things are thus all to be dissolved..." ([2Pe 3:10-11](#)) (a thing which we know to be all too possible in our time) what will remain but what is "spirit and truth"? This issue is being forcibly pressed in the nations, in Christendom, in evangelical Christianity, and in the experience of the Lord's own people.

This is the first and basic thing as to the fact and nature of the present dispensation, and of the great transition from the past. It will be intensified as the next transition of dispensations get nearer. With His foreknowledge of the passing of the earthly, temporal and material things; places, systems, fixed locations, and outward forms, the Lord Jesus put the whole matter of survival upon Himself as the constituent of a spiritual structure against which the very powers of hell would not prevail. Against fixed localizing and systematizing of Himself and His presence He was emphatic, and history is evidence of how right He was. If, according to [Joh 3:16](#), salvation is a matter of "whosoever", the Lord's presence and true worship, according to [Mat 18:20](#), is "wheresoever". The Lord is no more sympathetic toward being bound to this or that location than He is to making Paul or Apollos, or Cephas a gathering centre. Over against this very tendency in Corinth Paul wrote: "...with all that call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ in every place, their Lord and ours" ([1Co 1:2](#)). Exclusiveness, with its tragic entail of endless divisions, can only result - sooner or later - from a violation of this fundamental principle! That is all on the negative side, as warning and admonition; but what blessedness there is when - all things apart - it is only the Lord as the definite and consistent gathering object and delight! "Neither" ... "Nor" ... "But" in spirit and in truth.

Let it not be thought that, in dismissing one tight legal system governing His presence, He was putting nothing definite in its place. His thought is far from a nebulous generalization, a nondescript go-as-you-please kind of 'liberty', an independent free-lance unrelatedness. The law of His presence is a very definite and positive one; it is government by the Holy Spirit. This will not allow us to do as we like or go as we please - the misuse of the "wheresoever".

This is strictly - the dispensation of the Holy Spirit, and the measure of Christ, the measure of life, the measure of power, and of fruitfulness, depend entirely upon how much we recognize and move into this essential nature.

The Dispensation of the Holy Spirit

by T. Austin-Sparks

Chapter 3 - The Maintaining of the Lord's Testimony on the Earth

Reading: [1Ki 19:19-21](#); [2Ki 2:9-15](#) (1st part); [Act 1:1-3](#); [Joh 11:44](#).

These passages of Scripture, taken from the Old and the New Testaments, are a part of a revelation of the Lord's will as to the maintaining of His own testimony on this earth. The Old Testament story of Elijah and Elisha contains this truth and this principle, although it is an illustration. The New Testament passage in the Book of the Acts is no illustration: it is the actual, literal fulfilment of the illustration. Put together, you can quite clearly see that the thing they both say is this: The Lord desires to have a testimony concerning Himself maintained here in this world while He is in heaven. During the time that He is away it is His will and purpose that His testimony shall be maintained here.

That is the meaning, of course, of the spirit of Elijah resting upon Elisha when Elijah had been translated to glory. Elisha, by that anointing and enduement and clothing with the Holy Spirit, was to carry on - but even in greater fulness - and maintain the testimony of Elijah after the latter had gone to heaven.

Now you can say quite truly that the whole of the New Testament focuses upon this. Up to the time of His ascension the Lord Jesus was always pointing forward to that day. As we have seen in our earlier meetings, He was saying: "I go away... if I go" ([Joh 16:7](#)). He was always thinking in terms of that time when He would leave them, and was seeking to prepare them for that time. It was hard work for them to accept it, just as it was for Elisha to accept the departure of Elijah. He clung on to him just as long as he could! And these disciples found it exceedingly difficult to accept the fact that their Lord was going away. He had said: "It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you, but if I go, I will send him unto you" ([Joh 16:7](#)).

So the Lord was looking on to this time of His ascension and translation to glory, and was preparing His vessel for that time.

And then the vessel being found in place. That is a very important factor: to be found in place, prepared and on the spot when the Lord went up. Not many days afterwards the mantle of the Lord fell upon the disciples, and He made it perfectly clear to them that the purpose of their calling was to maintain His testimony in this world while He was away. And, of course, that is the very purpose, object and vocation of the Church and of the Lord's people.

Now, that is the setting, the basis of everything. It is well for us to grasp now, immediately, the inclusive implication of that. Why are we here as the Lord's people, individually and collectively? Why have we received the Holy Spirit, as we have done - or ought to have done if we are truly committed people? For one thing, all inclusively - that the Lord may be able, by means of us, to maintain His testimony in this world while He is away, and that He will come back to find that testimony not only intact and undiminished, but enlarged, increased, expanded, deepened and strengthened. That is the answer to the question: Why are we the Lord's people? And in that

sense we are just as important to the Lord as Elisha was to Elijah, and as these disciples were to the Master.

Having set the background or basis of things, there are a number of details which come out in this connection.

Called According to Purpose

Let us look at the figure, the type, the illustration, in the case of Elijah and Elisha. (We shall find the corresponding truths in the New Testament.) First of all, there was the most definite act of choosing. We read: "So he departed thence, and found Elisha the son of Shaphat... and cast his mantle upon him." Here is a crisis in the life of a man, and a very definite crisis indeed; a turning-point; the end of one phase and the beginning of another. It is clear cut. And although Elisha did make that request about going and kissing his father, he knew in himself that the day of transition from one phase of things to another had come for him. The hour had broken when one order was past and another order was beginning. And when Elijah seemed to give him his liberty and discharge (and it is very interesting to note that the Lord sometimes does that, to try us out. He says: 'All right, what have I done to you? Go back.') Elisha found he could not take it. Something had happened to him and he just could not take his liberty. He could not return to the old order of things. He went aside, slew his oxen, made a fire of the wood of the instruments, offered his sacrifice, gave to the people to eat, and went after Elijah. Something had happened. He knew that he was a chosen vessel. He knew that the hand of the Lord had come upon him. He knew that that mantle signified a succession to his Lord here on this earth, the endowment with a heavenly vocation.

So it proved. And, dear friends, if that sounds very specific and too wonderful, I want to remind you that the New Testament teaches us that that is true of every believer. "He chose us in him before the foundation of the world" ([Eph 1:4](#)). Who is the 'us'? That is not an exclusive call according to the order of Elisha or Paul, or Peter or John. The 'us' is the inclusive 'us' of the Church into which we are baptized in one Spirit.

I could quote much more. This choice, this election, falls upon all those who come under the apprehending hand of Jesus Christ when they, like Elisha, let go, capitulate, and commit themselves. They know that from that time onward they are not their own proprietors. They are the bond-slaves of Jesus Christ. They are the captives of a great and heavenly purpose.

That is not only something stated. It is a challenge to you and to me. There should be something like that, in the nature of an experience or a crisis, a definite transition, in the life of every child of God, where that child knows that 'something has happened and I am no longer the master of my own life. I am no longer the master of my own destiny. I am no longer free to go the way that I have been going, even if it has been with twelve yoke of oxen - a very thorough-going, all-out kind of life in that world. It is finished now, however big and great it was. I am in another realm and belong to another Master. I am called with another calling. There is another vocation resting upon me.' I do not mean that you have to give up your business in this world, but over and above everything else rests this heavenly vocation, wherever you are. The point is, dear friends, that we are "called according to his purpose" ([Rom 8:28](#)), chosen "in him before the foundation of the world" ([Eph 1:4](#)), an elect vessel as "members of his body" ([Eph 5:30](#)) the Church.

I don't want to smother everything by putting a lot on top of these things. I do want the full force of every fragment to come upon us. If you are not aware that this hand has come upon

you, that you, as Paul put it, have been "apprehended by Christ Jesus" ([Php 3:12](#)) - apprehended, arrested, taken in charge was how Paul thought of himself, and that is how it ought to be with every one of us. We have just been taken in charge by Jesus Christ - there is something defective in your committal to the Lord and in your relationship. And be sure that there will be a defectiveness in your testimony, or in the Lord's testimony in and through your life. That is where things begin.

But note: that was but the beginning. You may think that is enough. No, it is not, and you will find that other things follow.

Tested as to Reality

And the next thing that will follow this call, this outstretched hand of the Lord toward you, this apprehending, this encounter with the Lord, will mean that He will try you out as to whether you really do mean business. He is not going to have anybody in this great business of maintaining His testimony who does not really mean business. "Go back again; for what have I done to thee?" Can you go back? If you can, then do. I always say that to people. It means that you really have not come into anything very real if you can. That is a test on every matter which can be followed through to a thousand details. If you can say: 'Why can't I? May I not? Is this not allowed? Can I not go here, go there?' If you can, go... if you can, do it! But I venture to say that if something has happened, as you go to it you begin to have a bad time and say: 'No, I cannot. I just cannot'. You know that! However, the point is that you will be tested.

And then follows this. Elijah said to Elisha: "Tarry here, I pray thee; for the Lord hath sent me as far as Bethel. And Elisha said, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee. So they went down to Bethel." We don't know what happened at Bethel, but it seems as though Elijah immediately moved on further. He said: "Tarry here, I pray thee; for the Lord hath sent me to Jericho. And he said, As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee." And yet again: "Tarry here, I pray thee: for the Lord hath sent me to Jordan." And Elisha said: "As the Lord liveth, and as thy soul liveth, I will not leave thee" ([2Ki 2:2](#); [2Ki 2:4](#); [2Ki 2:6](#)).

You have heard this many times before, but the point is this: The Lord is going to prove us right up to the hilt, to the fourth dimension, as to whether we mean business with Him, how far our relationship with Him, for the sake of His testimony, takes pre-eminence over everything else, and how necessary this is to our life. Can we let it go? Can we be put off? Can we put something else in its place?

Dear friends, the question here, or the issue involved in this whole matter, is the issue of spiritual capacity for this great thing to which the Lord has called us. We need capacity, you know. We know quite well that we are not going to get through with this thing just willy-nilly, superficially. We are finding all the way along that we need more and more spiritual life, spiritual increase and spiritual measure, and it is a matter of our capacity in this thing for going on to the end. There are many who are falling out by the way, many who are returning, and many who are giving up and are put off and discouraged. The Lord knows that. Many went away from Him. "Jesus said therefore unto the twelve, Would ye also go away?" ([Joh 6:67](#)). You see, it is this testing all the time as to how much this really means to us, whether we are just camp-followers, as we say, whether we are just religionists, attenders at meetings, listeners to addresses, readers of books, members of some Christian fraternity; whether we are nominally bearing the name 'Christian', or whether we are of this order, able to say truly from the heart: 'Look here, I have no alternatives. There is no other way for me. This is very life, and the alternative, if there is one, is death.'

The Lord will bring us, as Elijah brought Elisha, to that severe testing in which Elijah took great risks of being misunderstood. I cannot dwell upon that, but he did. He could have involved himself in a lot of misunderstanding with Elisha, and Elisha might have said: 'Look here, this man does not want me. He is trying to get rid of me. Evidently I am mistaken about this whole thing', and, offended, he might have turned away. Well, Elijah took risks like that, and the Lord takes risks like that with us. I don't know how many of you have got to the place (if you haven't, don't worry. You may get there sooner or later) where the Lord's dealings with us sometimes make us wonder whether He really wants us after all. It does seem as though He is trying to put us off. The ways of the Lord are to our flesh sometimes very discouraging! We don't find a great deal of natural, soulful zest when we are passing through times of trial.

Well, leave that. Now then, how much do you really need what you are in by the call of God? How much is it really vital to you in consequence? Is it a matter of life or death? Now, you will need capacity, depth and spiritual enlargement, and you will need to be brought to the place where you are spiritually competent, reliable, able to take responsibility, and the only way of coming there is as Elisha came there, under the full endowment of the Holy Spirit, for this great vocation is being tested as to whether you really do mean business.

In the course of many years I have had quite a lot of letters written to me about the ministry in print, and this is one type of letter that I have often received: 'When I first came into possession of this ministry in print (referring to the magazine) I could not understand it, I could not appreciate it. It did not mean anything to me, so I just put the thing away. But then, for a year or two, or more, I went through deep waters and into such spiritual trial that I had to cry out to the Lord for something to help me in my difficulty. And then perchance I came on that printed ministry. My word, I would never have believed what was in it! It just met my need because I had gone through something that made it necessary.'

Forgive me illustrating in that way. I am not drawing attention to anything in particular, but am simply saying this: that we come to this place of evaluating our calling and setting a right estimate and value upon it only by way of deep trial and testing, where it becomes absolutely necessary to us, and if we don't know the Lord in some new way, it is the end of everything. The Lord tests us, you see, to enlarge our spiritual measure and capacity unto the going through with this great thing to which He has called us, to lay the deposit at His feet at last, undiminished, but rather increased.

This is what Paul said to Timothy: "O Timothy, guard that which is committed unto thee" ([1Ti 6:20](#)). Translated more literally that says: 'O Timothy, guard the deposit. Something has been committed to you, deposited with you, and you have got to hand it back to the Lord at the last day. See to it that nothing is lost.'

Well, we come to the capacity for that along this same line as Elisha, and you can see how it was with the apostles. How discouraged they might have been, especially during those strange forty days! Indeed, I think Peter showed some signs of giving way. It was so strange, this coming and going of the Lord during forty days! You could not be sure of Him. It all seemed so unreal. He was here one moment, and then He was gone, and you never knew when He would be here again, if ever. It was all so intangible, and, you know, this flesh must have something it can hold on to, and can see and be sure of. This spiritual life is such a trying thing to the natural man, and at last Peter said: "I go a fishing" ([Joh 21:3](#)) ... 'Fishes are more tangible. I know something about fishing, but I don't know much about the spiritual life. It is too much for me, so I go a fishing.' And the others said: "We also come with thee." But you know what happened and I

need not follow that through. It did not work. They had been called to something more than that - fishers of men.

However, the point is, dear friends, that you and I are put through very real testing and trials to find out whether we really mean business with God, and how much spiritual things count with us. Can we hold them lightly? Can we dispense with them easily, or has this become a master thing in our lives? Do we really know the bond of the Spirit, the bond of the mantle which has laid hold of us? We are men and women who are in the charge of the Spirit of Jesus Christ and it must be like that to fulfil this vocation.

Alive, But in Bondage

Now, there is another thing. And this is a thing that you and I must be very clear about; we must be on very sure ground in this matter. That is why I took that little fragment from [John 11](#) about Lazarus. The Lord had called him out of the tomb, and he came forth "bound hand and foot with graveclothes; and his face was bound about with a napkin". I don't know anything about that, as I am not a mortician. If there is one here he will understand why it is necessary to bind a dead man's hands and feet and tie up his face. We will leave that. But Lazarus came forth like this, bound hand and foot, with a napkin round his face, and the Lord Jesus said: "Loose him, and let him go." He is raised, brought back into life, and is out of the realm of death and of the grave, but he is still terribly tied up. He must be loosed, freed from all traces of that old realm, with all its ties, bonds, limitations, frustrations and burdens, and be a man at liberty, set free for God. There is no need for me to point out that Lazarus was here standing in relation to the testimony of Jesus in a very vital way. Read the story again. "This sickness is not unto death, but for the glory of God, that the Son of God may be glorified thereby" ([Joh 11:4](#)). Here is the testimony - "that the Son of God may be glorified" - and the testimony has these phases and aspects.

First: being brought out from the realm of death into newness of life. Then it has the other aspect of being completely set free from all that which is of the past, a person absolutely at liberty... at liberty? Yes, at liberty, but a liberty in a bondage such as has never been before. It is the bondage of the absolute lordship of Jesus Christ, the absolute sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. A lot of Christians are saved; they are born anew; they pass from death into life; but, oh! what a lot of trappings they have brought with them into the new realm! A lot of the old ties still follow them through, and hold them bound - hand and feet and head. You know what I mean without my illustrating, and it is true.

Let me put it in another way. There are many Christians who have not yet come into and under the absolute sovereignty of the Holy Spirit. What do we mean by the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit? Well, this is a thing that the Lord Jesus was constantly trying to press and impress. Take that fragment with Nicodemus. Undoubtedly, here is a man in bondage, all tied up with natural ties. He is not even yet through from death to life. And the Lord said to him: "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the voice thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh, and whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit" ([Joh 3:8](#)). You see what He was saying? Have you ever tried conclusions with a hurricane? Have you ever tried to set yourself against a mighty, rushing wind? Well, look at the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit came like a rushing, mighty wind, and see who can stand up to that! Who can hold on his own independent way when that is happening? The wind blows where it likes, and you cannot say to it: 'You must come this way, or go that way. You must do this, or that.' It just does as it likes. That is all. The wind is sovereign. And if you know anything about it, you know quite well that the only thing to do is to set your sails and let that wind carry you on. To try to withstand it means trouble.

Now the Lord is speaking about the Holy Spirit, and the words to Nicodemus illustrate the day of Pentecost and what followed. He is saying: 'Now, look here, Nicodemus, you are all tied up with your legalities, your traditions, and your natural life. You will have to come to the place where you let go to the Spirit of God and completely capitulate to Him. You will never get into the Kingdom at all until that happens. Capitulate to the Spirit, and do not say this, or that, or the other thing. That is all taken out of your hands and put into the hands of the Holy Spirit to say which way, and what, and so on.' The sovereignty of the Holy Spirit means that all our old ties are removed and these old bonds are taken off. We are brought into a new captivity.

That is just the theme of Paul's letter to the Galatians. On the one side there are the bonds, and ties, and graveclothes of the law. On the other side, how much Paul is saying to them about the Spirit! "Having begun in the Spirit, are ye now perfected in the flesh?" (3:3). He is appealing to them not to be brought again under the yoke of bondage, but to remain under this mighty mastery of the Spirit, which he calls liberty, real liberty.

Now, you see, with Elisha it came to the point of a final committal, or commitment, at Jordan, and that is what Jordan always means. It is a type of the Cross, where for ever the bound is met and passed through, or over, from the old self-governed, self-directed life and way to the absolute mastery of the Spirit. When Elisha got through that, to that point of complete committal, the mantle of Elijah came down on him, as everybody recognised. "The spirit of Elijah doth rest upon Elisha" ([2Ki 2:15](#)). The final committal is at Jordan, at the Cross, where there is full abandonment to the absolute sovereignty of the Holy Spirit, for Him to say: 'This way, or that way. Hither, or thither', never allowing us to dictate anything at all.

But, oh! What a lot of limitation continues in our life because, well, we want to say which way, what it is to be, and what it is not to be. We have arguments with the Lord and we have controversies with the Holy Spirit, but once He gets that complete sovereignty you see what happens.

We spoke earlier of the inestimable blessing of an opened heaven. Well, Elisha came into that, didn't he? "Chariots of Israel, and the horsemen thereof." An opened heaven and the Spirit coming through the opened heaven, as the master went into glory. It is the parable of this truth that we have here in the Book of the Acts, and that book is the continuation of this testimony. It has so often been pointed out that it is a book which was never finished. Perhaps you, like me, have often wished that Luke had written his third volume and carried it somewhere nearer to completion, telling us what happened afterwards. But, no, the Holy Spirit never allowed that story to be ended, because it is not ended yet. We are in the third volume of the Acts of Jesus Christ now! That volume of the doings and teachings of Jesus Christ is being written now, and we will read it later on.

But, dear friends, the truth is the same. The same Lord is in heaven. The same Holy Spirit has come forth from heaven to us. The same testimony of Jesus as was committed to those disciples and apostles has been committed to us. The same glorious endowment is ours, the endowment of the Holy Spirit. What an endowment!

I wanted to take you to some of the things in the life of Elisha, to talk to you about that poor widow and her oil, the collecting, the borrowing of very many vessels from all her neighbours, and the miracle of the never-ending oil while there was a need. Well, you can see yourself what that means. The blessed, wonderful sufficiency of the Holy Spirit to meet all need, to pay all obligations and to get through with the testimony to the glory of God. One passage from Paul is enough to include that: "God is able to make all grace abound unto you; that ye, having always

all sufficiency in everything, may abound" ([2Co 9:8](#)). That is the woman and her pots of oil overflowing - the all-sufficiency of the Holy Spirit, however long we live, to meet the last demand. What a blessed thing that is!

And I wanted to talk to you about Naaman and his mighty experience of this power of the Spirit, but we must leave him.

And, then what about the sons of the prophets of Jericho, who said: "Behold now, the place where we dwell before thee is too strait for us. Let us go, we pray thee, unto Jordan... and let us make us a place there, where we may dwell" ([2Ki 6:1-2](#)). The question of enlargement again, of capacity for usefulness and service. You know they went down to Jordan, and as they were cutting down the trees for this enlargement, the axe-head of one came off and fell into the water, which was evidently so deep that they could not see where it was. Elisha said: "Where fell it?" And then the result - and by this act of Elisha "the iron did swim" ([2Ki 6:6](#) - RV margin). That is the focal point of it: that, dear friends, which by nature would always sink and go to the bottom, is made to reverse its course and swim. What a story is in that of spiritual experience through the centuries! You and I by nature are always ready to sink. That is our way! Even in the work of the Lord our way is so often the down way. We say we get down - 'I am down today.' We are gravitating downwards - the forces of gravity are too much for us. And then, by the miracle of the Holy Spirit, ascendancy comes in and takes charge, where the natural course would be downwards. I have no space to enlarge upon that - I just indicate it.

These are things which become very true in the spiritual life when the Holy Spirit is in charge. The order is reversed. You and I naturally have a great propensity for getting down. The Holy Spirit reverses that natural way and brings us up again and again. This heavy iron of our natures is made to swim. You know something about that!

The Dispensation of the Holy Spirit

by T. Austin-Sparks

Chapter 4 - Spiritual Enlargement Unto the Maintaining of the Testimony of Jesus

I want to take you back to the point where Elijah cast his mantle upon Elisha, which meant that Elisha was called, apprehended for that ministry of succeeding his master after the master had gone up to heaven. Then there were those journeys of the two, the testing out of Elisha, from Gilgal to Bethel, from Bethel to Jericho, from Jericho to Jordan, the passage of the Jordan, the ascension of Elijah in the chariot of fire, and the falling of his mantle upon Elisha, Elisha having already made the request that there might be a double portion of his master's spirit resting upon him. This verily came to pass, so that the sons of the prophets, when they saw Elisha return from the ascension scene said: "The spirit of Elijah doth rest upon Elisha" ([2Ki 2:15](#)).

From there we take up some of the impressive incidents which were the outworking of that anointing, that double portion of the Spirit, which fell upon Elisha: that maintenance and extension of the testimony of the master in the power of the Holy Spirit. It is difficult not to see the correspondence between that Old Testament story and what we have in the New Testament: our Lord, Master and Head, through the Jordan (that is, through the Cross), ascending to the right hand, the majesty in the heavens, and His mantle falling upon His waiting, expectant and committed servants, the Church, and from that time the wonderful things which transpired in the pursuance of the testimony of the Lord in and through His Church on the earth.

Now I am going back to the Old Testament story again, just to pick out of that considerable number of impressive incidents the three to which I have referred, and to add a little further word to them, reminding you that this is not just Old Testament history, Bible story, interesting and instructive as it is, but that we stand at this time in that very position. We are here as the Lord's vessel - a part of it - in this very place. It may be a small part, but it is a part of that vessel that is left here on this earth while our Lord is away, in order to maintain His testimony, or that He may maintain His testimony, here in this world until He returns. That is our wonderful calling, but that is our great responsibility, and everyone here is involved in that responsibility if we belong to the Lord. This ought to come upon us with great force. You and I, taking it individually, are entrusted with no lesser thing than the maintaining of the testimony of Jesus on this earth in His absence. That is our calling, that is our business, that is our responsibility, but, blessed be God! that is provided for abundantly by Him in the gift of the Holy Spirit.

There are just a few further words to say on these three particular incidents that we have lifted out from the larger number in the ministry of Elisha.

Enlargement Unto Spiritual Fullness

Firstly, the story of that widow who had just two sons and was in a state of great poverty. The creditors came and, she being unable to meet her liabilities, they were about to take her sons away, put them into servitude, and make them, by servitude, pay her debts, leaving her alone in destitution and desolation.

Elisha came to her, and she made her appeal to him, telling him of her sad plight, and he said: "What has thou in the house? And she said, Thine handmaid hath not any thing in the house, save a pot of oil" ([2Ki 4:2](#)). 'That is all I have.' He said: 'Go to all your neighbours and borrow vessels, empty vessels, and borrow not a few.' Well, we can use our imagination if we like. We can see that woman hastening - and sending her sons - in all directions, collecting all the empty vessels that she could borrow, bringing them to the house. The prophet said: 'Now pour out.' You know the rest of the story. She poured and poured, every vessel was filled, until she had no vessel left. The prophet would have said: 'Go on! Go on!', but she said: 'There is not another vessel', and the oil stayed.

It is a wonderful story. It is an impressive story when we read it in the light of the so much larger revelation of the Lord's provision for maintaining His testimony. Of course, there are many things in that story which are instructive, but we are not going to dwell upon those details. I just want to put my finger upon the one thing which seems to include all the others, and there is so much in the New Testament that is related to this in principle and in spiritual value.

When the Lord is moving in relation to His testimony, when He is really moving to do something, He does not do it - as we say - by halves. He does it abundantly. Now what I want especially to underline in each of these stories, or accounts, is this matter of spiritual enlargement. You will notice that that is the governing thing in every one of these instances: spiritual enlargement unto all that this testimony of Jesus requires.

If you like, you can put yourself into the place of those borrowed vessels. Let this meeting place stand for that widow's home, and we are all here as vessels, borrowed vessels, if you like. They must be empty vessels, as we shall see. But here we are. Now, so far as we are concerned, and so far as you find the Lord's people anywhere are concerned, the Lord's great thought is fullness, spiritual fullness. The Lord does not believe in vacuums. He does not believe in leaving things empty. Look at His work in creation. The earth was without form and void. However, God's

thought is not to leave anything empty and void, but to fill it, and you and I know how abundant creation is. How it spreads itself, spontaneously! You cannot cope with the fullness of the natural creation. But in the spiritual realm we have the higher thought of God, which is fullness.

On the Day of Pentecost the disciples were in an upper room, gathered together, and it says that these vessels "were all filled with the Holy Spirit" ([Act 2:4](#)). Go through the book of the Acts and you will find that it is repeated again and again: "They were all filled with the Holy Spirit" (e.g. [Act 4:31](#)), and you know that that was always the teaching of the Apostles. Paul says: "Be filled with the Spirit" ([Eph 5:18](#)). At the marriage in Cana of Galilee the vessels were empty, and the Lord said: 'Fill them', "and they filled them up to the brim" ([Joh 2:7](#)). The Lord's idea for His people is that they should be filled.

That, of course, is the first lesson about the testimony. You will never be able to maintain this testimony unless you are a filled vessel, full of the Lord, full of the Spirit, full of His Divine life. It is essential, but it is blessedly possible because it is the Lord's will and the Lord's provision. "He giveth not the Spirit by measure" ([Joh 3:34](#)). Fullness is His thought and His will. Are you quite sure that you are a filled vessel?

Now then: one thing is essential: before you can be filled by the Lord you have got to be emptied of everything else. 'Borrow empty vessels,' said the prophet, "not a few" ([2Ki 4:3](#)). Before the Apostles could be filled on the Day of Pentecost they had to be emptied at the Cross - and they were emptied! Ask Peter how he felt on that day! Ask the two on the way to Emmaus how they felt! Ask Thomas how he felt at that time! I think the one thing they would all have said was: 'Utterly empty. Everything has gone.' But that is the kind of emptying that is necessary - the emptying of our own selves, our own self-confidence, our own self-strength, our own self-wisdom, our own self-will. Until that emptying of ourselves has been done there will be no fullness of the Spirit. "Empty vessels... not a few" - as many as you like.

And the other thing is just that it is we who put the limit on the Lord. The Lord never puts the limit on us. Elisha might have said to that woman: 'Come on, let us have more vessels. We can go on.' The Lord can go on if you will offer Him the facility, if you will make the provision, if you will give Him the opportunity, if you will let Him have what He wants - as many as you can bring. If only you will go on He will go on. The oil never stayed until the woman stopped. And the Lord never stops until we stop. If we are ready to go on, He will go on.

I repeat - we put the limit on the Lord. It is such a tragedy that we do so and limit Him. You know, that was the charge that was leveled against Israel: "They... limited the Holy One of Israel" ([Psa 78:41](#) - AV). It was a judgment that they did that, for they said: "Can God prepare a table in the wilderness?" (verse 19), and in doing so they limited the Holy One of Israel.

The Lord will go on while we are conscious of need and while we put no limit of unbelief or of any other kind upon Him. Fullness is His thought and intention, and you can have continual fullness. John's testimony, after a long life, when he was an old man of about ninety - and he had started with the Lord Jesus as a young man - was: "Of his fullness we all received, and grace for grace" ([Joh 1:16](#)). That is a long life of testimony, to be able to speak at the end about fullness.

Do not think that it is necessary, when you get old, that you should get empty. That is just the opposite of what the Lord intends. He wants fullness at the beginning and fullness at the end. This is what should mark our lives: that we have always got a margin of that which is of the Lord to draw upon.

Well, that is the simple, yet far-reaching first lesson of the Old Testament story. And you can read your New Testament again in the light of that.

Enlargement of Vision

The second incident was that of Naaman, the leper commander-in-chief of the Syrian army. You will recall the story, so I will not give you details. We will just take him up where he set out with his great retinue to visit Elisha with a quest for his healing, having been advised by the little captive servant maid in his home that there was a prophet in Israel, and if he would go to him she was sure he would heal Naaman, her master, of his leprosy. Well, he arrived with his retinue, and you will remember that Elisha did not even go out to meet him, did not make any fuss of him at all, and did not even see him. He sent his messenger, his servant, to find out what it was all about, and then gave his command: "Go and wash in Jordan seven times" ([2Ki 5:10](#)). Poor Naaman had a lot of trouble over that! "Are not Abanah and Pharpar, rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? May I not wash in them, and be clean?" ([2Ki 5:12](#)). He had to get down very low, off - as we say - his high horse of personal importance and pride in order to receive. That is by the way, and you can take all these details in as we go on. That is not the message.

Having at last had his pride overcome, and having come to see that it was either his pride, on the one side, or his healing on the other - he could choose which he liked - he came down on the side of healing, and went and bathed himself in the Jordan seven times, and was made whole.

Now, I say there are a lot of details in the story; it is full of instruction. But I want to get to our one thing, this matter of enlargement, the way of the enlargement of the testimony, and I want to take you over to the Gospel by Luke, chapter four. You will remember that the Lord Jesus had come to Nazareth, where He was brought up: "He entered, as his custom was, into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up to read. And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Isaiah. And he opened the book and found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he anointed me to preach..." ([Luk 4:16-18](#)). There we are on the ground of the Holy Spirit. We have come right back to Elisha, to this double portion of the Spirit, this anointing of the Spirit: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me."

Now note! After He read the portion, stopping at a very significant point, He said: "Today hath this scripture been fulfilled in your ears" ([Luk 4:21](#)). And then He went on to say: "No prophet is acceptable in his own country". "Anointed... prophet" - we are in spirit with Elisha all the time. Now listen: "There were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed but only Naaman the Syrian" (verse 27). "In Israel... the Syrian", the outsider, the one of another nation. They saw the point in Nazareth and were filled with anger. They thrust Him out and took Him to the brow of the hill upon which their city was built, intending to cast Him over. Mark, in referring to this incident, said: "He marvelled because of their unbelief... and he could there do no mighty work" ([Mar 6:6](#); [Mar 6:5](#)).

This is the point. The Lord deliberately struck a blow that day at the narrow prejudice and exclusiveness of Israel, and said: 'In the days of Elisha the Lord went outside of Israel.' Israel had plenty of lepers, but the Lord went outside of Israel to meet Naaman, the Syrian. The Lord's thought is not some little, narrow, exclusive, bigoted thing that thinks it is everything and has everything, as Israel did. The Lord's thought is as big as everybody who is in need, be he Syrian or Jew, or any other. Christ is big enough for all the nations.

That was the great trouble. You see, they were filled with anger when He struck at their exclusiveness and said: 'Really, what you people need is spiritual enlargement, to get away from this narrowness, this littleness, this straitening of your Lord and making Him so much smaller than He really is. You need enlargement.' They were angry!

You notice that almost exactly the same thing happened when this same Holy Spirit made Peter go right away up north country to the house of a Gentile, Cornelius, the centurion. The Holy Spirit made him do it against his own will. Peter had said: "Not so, Lord; for I have never eaten anything that is common or unclean" ([Act 10:14](#)). But the Lord said: "Arise... go with them." The Holy Spirit was in charge, as sovereign. He is going to extend the bounds of this testimony, and is not going to tolerate this little thing, with its smallness and exclusiveness - shut in. He is removing the grave clothes. Fullness is His thought for all. Now Peter had to go because the Spirit made him go, and when he was there the Spirit let him know very effectively that this was what He was doing, because later Peter says: "As I began to speak, the Holy Ghost fell on them" ([Act 11:15](#)). Well, when Peter got back to Jerusalem he went into a pretty hot fire! The Apostles at Jerusalem hauled him over the coals for breaking the bands of Israel, for forcing open the nations. All Peter could say, almost apologetically, was: "If then God gave unto them the like gifts as he did also unto us, when we believed on the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I, that I could withstand God?" ([Act 11:17](#)).

You see, that is what brought about the death of Stephen. That is why they gnashed upon him and stoned him to death. Why? Well, if you read Stephen's address to them you will find that it was all against their nationalistic limitation and smallness and prejudice, and Stephen gathered it all up in this one phrase: "Ye do always resist the Holy Ghost" ([Act 7:51](#)). The Holy Ghost is for enlargement, and is against littleness, smallness, narrowness and exclusiveness, and if He is, we ought to be against it. To make Christ smaller than He is is to resist the Holy Ghost. There were many lepers in Israel, but to none of them was the prophet sent, but to Naaman, the Syrian. I think we should see the point of that.

Enlargement is the Lord's thought. Not only fullness of the vessels, but enlargement of vision to embrace all for whom Christ died, and to love all who are subjects of His grace.

Enlargement of Ministry

The third story is that of the sons of the prophets coming to Elisha and saying: "The place where we dwell before thee is too strait for us. Let us go, we pray thee, unto Jordan, and take thence every man a beam, and let us make us a place there, where we may dwell" ([2Ki 6:2](#)).

Here is the question of enlargement again, from another standpoint and in another way. What is it this time?

Well, first, enlargement is the vessel being full, and all the vessels being full.

Secondly, enlargement is the enlargement of vision, the end of all personal and collective introspection. It is a most fatal thing to be turned in upon ourselves, and all the time to have a narrower vision than the Lord's vision.

Now we come to the sons of the prophets. What is this? The testimony is again involved, and it is involved in the matter of service. You see, they are the sons of the prophets, and now it is the question of service amongst the Lord's people: an enlargement unto service for the testimony of Jesus. I think the best way in which we can get at this is to come right over to our New Testament at once.

We have two letters in the New Testament - of course, we have several twin letters in it - but we have this set of twins in the Corinthian letters, and I need not tell you what is in them. I think everybody knows what is in the first letter to the Corinthians! It is a sorry state of no testimony in the city. Oh, what an appalling spiritual smallness there is in the Corinthian church in that first letter! The second letter? Well, it is the enlargement of ministry, isn't it? "Therefore", says the Apostle, "seeing we have this ministry" ([2Co 4:1](#)), and he gives much light on what the ministry is. I am not going to deal with those details, but it is all a matter of enlargement unto ministry. The cry of the Apostle to the Corinthians is this: "Our mouth is open unto you, O Corinthians, our heart is enlarged... be ye also enlarged" ([2Co 6:11](#); [2Co 6:13](#)). 'Your trouble is that you are too small, too little in yourselves, and too petty in your spiritual life and your spiritual measure.'

What was it that made them small and destroyed their ministry? Well, read the first chapters again and you cannot miss it. "Each one of you saith I... I... I... are ye not carnal... after the manner of men?" ([1Co 1:12](#); [1Co 3:3](#)). And then he speaks about the natural man - "Now the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God... he cannot know them" ([1Co 2:14](#)). He is under a veto, an embargo, a limitation. Live on the ground of the self-life, whatever form it may take, intellectually, emotionally, volitionally, or in any other way, and you will be a little person spiritually. You will be a petty person spiritually, all tied up, limited, and you will have a very small testimony. But "he that is spiritual judgeth all things" ([1Co 2:15](#)).

It would seem that between the two letters something happened, that they had escaped from the littleness of the natural life and the natural ground unto something more of the Spirit. They had become enlarged in their spiritual life, in their hearts and in their minds, enlarged by the power of the Holy Spirit - and then you have the ministry: "We have this ministry" ('We have this testimony') "We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the exceeding greatness of the power may be of God" ([2Co 4:7](#)).

Oh, we need this basic work to deliver us from ourselves! That is it, isn't it? In every form, in every way - our self-estimates, our self-will, our self-strength! All that, and then the place of our habitation will be enlarged, we will build something bigger, and the testimony will go on and there will be a ministry.

I know how simple, perhaps elementary, are the things that I am saying, but they are basic, and very important.

The Place of Jordan

In closing I want to remind you of the place that Jordan had here in the life and ministry of Elisha. He started at Jordan with Elijah; it was at Jordan that he came into his ministry. Naaman had to go and wash seven times in Jordan before he came into the enlargement that the Lord was bringing about. The sons of the prophets went to Jordan to cut down wood, and it was there that the axe-head came off and went to the bottom, and the iron was made to swim.

Well, here you are. 1 Corinthians is the natural life which goes downward. 2 Corinthians is the spiritual life of resurrection which comes upward. There is no service in our downward gravitation, is there? We are no use to the Lord like that! Get down, and you are no use to the Lord at all. Follow your own natural life and you get out of the Lord's use. But when His Divine resurrection life comes in by the Holy Spirit, the iron swims. That which would otherwise always go down is made to rise. The power of His resurrection is at work. It is the reversing of our natures, bringing us into the life of the Spirit and the ministry, and the testimony goes on.

May the Lord write these lessons deeply in our hearts and make us really understand His thought for every one of us: His spiritual fullness - nothing less. That is your birthright - to have of His fullness. There are no special classes for this. It is for all - "they were all filled". That is the Lord's thought for you and for me - to be filled. It is His desire, and He desires that we should have our vision continually enlarged. Oh, God save us from becoming smaller in any way than the thought of the Lord Jesus! The Lord save us from becoming exclusive, shut in, tied up with limits that He does not put upon things! Christ is so great. We need never fear that we shall out-measure Christ, especially if we live in and walk by the Spirit. We shall not find that the Spirit's way is cramping, closing in. The Spirit's way is unto Jerusalem, Samaria, and to the uttermost parts of the earth, the fullest bounds of Divine grace. And our testimony - it is only another word for ministry - ministry sometimes seems very professional. We think of the ministry as being that of some special body of people. Call it 'testimony', and then we are all in it. Our testimony will be effective, will be released when we are ourselves delivered from what we are naturally. Do you know yourself? Oh, the terrible limitations there are in our natures and temperaments! We are all made in one way or another, and there are terrible limitations in our make-up. The Holy Spirit can lift us free of ourselves and our natural make-up, and enlarge us with the enlargement of Christ.

May it be so!