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A Message for the Hour

by T. Austin-Sparks

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The Vital Importance of Spiritual Vision

"Where there is no vision the people cast off restraint" Proverbs 29:18.

"My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge" Hosea 4:6.

The first quotation above is from the Book of Wisdom. The wisdom of that statement has been overwhelmingly proved by much history and experience. There is a sense in which this explains a vast amount of spiritual tragedy, both individual and collective. This will be explained as we proceed. But first we must define the terms.

1. The Text - Its Interpretation and Meaning

(a) "Vision" - What is Meant by the Word?

This is the word used to define and summarise the message of the Prophets: e.g. "The vision of Isaiah the son of Amoz".

Sometimes it was as in a trance, or dream, but this was by no means general or invariable. It certainly was not essentially a matter of ocular or objective presentation, so that the matter took

visual or oral form to the senses. The "vision" came in various ways, and the method is of little account. It is what it amounted to that is important. That was

The Message from the Lord for the Hour

We should resolve it all into that. If we have the message of the Lord *for the hour* we have what the Bible means by "Vision". If we have what the Bible calls vision, we have the message of the Lord for the hour; although the full fulfilment may reach far ahead.

It can therefore be easily seen that the absence of such a message - especially if the hour is a critical one - could have grave results. The Bible give various instances and explanations of the absence of "vision".

Hosea 4:6,7 gives 'rejection' as the cause, and note the serious reaction of the Lord to this rejection.

In 1 Samuel 3:1 spiritual declension is the cause.

Or it might be because of diversion and preoccupation with things other than the supreme purpose of God.

Again, the spiritual organ of vision may be so injured by selfish interests, or sinful indulgences, or neglect, as to make seeing almost impossible.

Whatever may be the cause, the result is serious.

That leads us to

(b) "Perish" (A.V.) "Cast off Restraint" (R.V.)

But neither translation gives the full content. By using various words or phrases we could get nearer the meaning. 'The people let go: fall to pieces: go loose: run wild: or disintegrate.'

A good example is seen in Israel at the foot of Sinai worshipping the calf. The Lord told Moses that they had "broken loose".

It may be disconcertedness, bewilderment, consternation, distractedness, terror. Or it may be disappointment, grief, perplexity, or impatience.

The causes may be many, but the effect is disintegration. A disintegrated life or community is one that is useless and helpless; weak, defeated, and paralysed.

So much for the definition - at present.

2. The Message

(a) If what is indicated above is true, then surely the first part of the message is that of the vital importance of there being a word from God *for the hour*.

It is essential to God's purpose that there is in critical times and ominous days a vessel with the essential message of God.

It is difficult to imagine a more grievous and tragic situation than that of there being no voice to interpret nor message to govern in a day when people are peeled, broken and bewildered.

(b) What is the essential element in 'vision', or the message from God?

It is certainly authority - the voice of authority.

We could almost paraphrase our text thus - "Where there is no voice of authority the people go to pieces".

But this authority is not in the tone or strength of voice or utterance. It is not in the force of personality, or in any human factor in itself.

What is

The Nature of Authority?

(a) It is clarity and certainty as to God's end and objective.

That is a statement made. We do not intend at this point to indicate or discuss what that end is, but it will readily be seen and realised that if there is not clarity and certainty as to what God is set upon, working toward, and supremely concerned with, there most certainly lacks the essential integrating factor in life and work. For things to be ends in themselves; merely to be doing things without an all-dominating, adequate, and supremely justifying Divine purpose is to result in collapse, loss of heart, and 'going to pieces' in the day of the fiery ordeal.

(b) Then it is clarity and certainty as to God's method.

Again, without at the moment trying to indicate what God's method is, we but emphasize that God does have a method - His own appointed and designed method - of reaching His end. That end is not going to be reached either willy-nilly or by ways of man's inventing, choosing, or designing. It is just on this point that a vast amount of miscarriage, frustration, and loss have marked so much expenditure.

To be able to indicate the boundless method of God is to have that kind of authority which, though it may be flouted or rejected meantime, will be vindicated by eventual proof.

(c) Further, it is clarity and certainty as to God's means.

Does it need stressing that God has always shown Himself to be very jealous regarding the means employed for His purpose? To be clear and sure on this matter is to be where God can commit Himself, and that is always authority. While this matter of means may apply to numerous things, it is discernible in Scripture that God has His means chosen and appointed for reaching and realising His end, and that He does not normally depart from it; and never so, finally.

(d) Finally, it is clarity and certainty as to God's principles.

That the Bible is a book of principles is its supreme value and meaning. That God therefore builds and fulfils history and design on spiritual principles - never deviating from them, infringing, nor

weakening as to them - is something of fundamental importance to be apprehended. The recognition or identifying of those principles, or the principle involved in any situation, is to be in a position of great strength - authority.

This was the essential nature of the authority which was so definitely felt in the case of Christ Himself. Not mystic, psychic, or merely intellectual, but a getting behind *things* as such to the principle involved. This is what is meant by spiritual discernment, and without it there is spiritual disintegration, or lack of integration, as at Corinth (see 1 Corinthians, chapter 2).

All this is enough, at present, to lead us to see that our text is very true and sound. We see the tremendous power of "vision" in the matter of bringing and holding together; what Paul called "standing fully assured".

3. The Application of the Principle

(a) To the Individual

It is of supreme importance to the strength and steadfastness of the individual Christian's life that it is *seen* that there is a *purpose* unto which and into which we are called in Christ. This is not only a life, it is a life governed by a mighty objective.

(b) To the Local Company

For a clear, strong, and effective testimony in any location it is essential that the Church as represented there is more than a congregation, a number of individuals; but a unit, a single corporate organic entity.

For this the essential is "vision", that is, all seeing together God's purpose, and being integrated thereby.

(c) To the Church Universal

The only hope of a bettering of the situation in the divided and therefore weakened Church as it is, is the recovery of a seeing of God's single objective, the recognition of God's essential method and means, and the discernment of His unalterable and inviolable principles.

We shall try to fill in these four features or components of authority later, but here we present what we believe to be the necessity and the nature of "vision", and must leave all who have any concern for the interests of God and of His people to seek Him the more earnestly for "a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the (full) knowledge of him", 'the eyes of the understanding being enlightened'. (Ephesians 1:7).

Christianity's Coming Ordeal

We close this part of our consideration by pointing to the gravity and seriousness of this matter in the light of present trends. It is our conviction that Christianity is in the way of a serious crisis.

Our grounds for this conviction will be stated later, but both from the Bible and from present processes we feel that there is ample ground for believing that Christianity will pass into a worldwide ordeal of testing and sifting.

It is spreading rapidly from the East and, being energised by a supernatural force, with Satan's last and consummate challenge to God's Christ as its all-out motif, even its instruments will not be able to stop the tiger that they have mounted.

But God's Sovereignty is over all, and the issue is none other than what is truly, genuinely, and intrinsically Christ and what is - not just opposite, but - imitation, assumed.

With this ordeal pressing on so that every agency of men and institutions is proving impotent to stem it, the greatest need of our time is a ministry and message that brings God's people into the presence of that all-governing purpose to which He has immovably committed Himself.

One of the perils of the hour is to mistake the significance of things. For instance, there are great evangelistic movements with tens of thousands being brought together, and large numbers making a profession of "accepting Christ". The peril in this for the Church is to be caught up in it as *the* main and most important thing in our time.

What really ought to be recognised is that at best it is a large-scale drawing attention to the fact of God and of Christ with a view to leaving the world without excuse. This is according to Scripture.

The writer was impressed with this when recently following immediately upon one such great campaign in a city in America he asked a number of Counsellors what the effect had been. The agreement of these was that of all who had signed cards - a large proportion being "decisions for Christ" - the majority were already members of churches. This is tremendously significant, and would surely imply that God is not willing to leave people in a false position. Would to God that the convenors of large Christian conventions could realise that, while "deepening of the spiritual life" is essential to preparation for the ordeal, the motive and purpose, the reason and mainspring is in God's eternal purpose, not in the Christian life itself.

A tremendous additional factor of immense effectiveness will come into such conventions if, right at their centre there is that "prophetic" ministry which - coming from "vision" - is God's message *for the hour* in relation to - not just an interpretation of "prophecy" (as of some school) - but the *spiritual* significance of the course of things!

The Lord raise up and send such messengers!