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The Spirit in Prison

by T. Austin-Sparks

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The history of Christianity from the latter days of the Apostles is the history of prisons. Not literal, material prisons, though there have been not a few of these, but prisons which are the result of man's inveterate habit of taking hold and bringing into bondage. How many times has the Spirit broken loose and moved in a new and free way, only to have that way brought under the control of man and crystallized into another 'Form', Creed, Organization, Denomination, Sect, 'Order', Community, etc.! The invariable result has been that the free movement and life of the Spirit has been cramped, or even killed, by the prison of the framework into which it has been drawn or forced. Every time we seek to express something Divine in word or form we at once limit it, and when that expression or form becomes the established and recognised formula we have in effect put fetters on the Spirit. God gives a vision, and every God-given vision has illimitable potentialities; but all too soon the vision is laid hold of by men who never had it in or of the Spirit, and the grapes of Eshcol turn to raisins in their hands. So very many of the living fruits of the heavenly country have suffered in this way, and have become dried, shrunken, ununctionless shadows of their early glory.

Upon a living movement of the Spirit born with fire in the heart of some Prophet, successors, sponsors, or adherents build an earthly organization, and imprison the vision in a tradition. So a *Message* becomes a Creed; a "Heavenly Vision" becomes an earthly institution; a movement of the Spirit becomes a 'Work', which must be kept going by the steam of human energy, and maintained by man's resourcefulness.

Sooner or later any real or seeming departure or diversion from the 'recognised' and traditional order of Creed or practice will be heresy, to be violently suspect, repressed, and outcast. Too often what, at its beginning, was a spiritual energy producing a living organism expressing something that God really wanted and to which He gave *birth* has become something which the next generation has to sustain and work hard to keep going. The thing has developed a self-interest and it will go hard with anyone or anything interfering with it, or seeming so to do. The Spirit has become the prisoner of the institution or system, and the people become limited spiritually as the result.

Why is all this so true, resulting, as it does, in strain, divisions, jealousies, rivalries, and often deception? And, if there is any remedy, what is it?

The answer is to be found in an honest - if costly - facing of the fundamental question. Why am I where I am? Did I enter into something objectively? Was it something already formed which was presented to me, with an appeal, an argument, a 'need'? Was it a *something* at all? Or did the Spirit open the eyes of my heart, and give me a *heavenly* vision, which on one side made me cry "Woe is me" and on the other "Here am I"? Was it a life crisis? Did I take up a 'teaching', a complexion of truth, a 'work', an enterprise? Was I right at the very source of life? Was it a definite and overpowering 'apprehending' from Heaven? Is my position that of relationship to something from which I can resign? In a word, is my imprisonment that of a system or order of an outward kind, or am I the 'bondslave' of the Spirit? The Apostle Paul, in particular, shows that the former bondage or imprisonment can even be to what is in the Bible, in the form of what he calls "the letter", and the Bible - in this sense - can be 'death' ("the letter killeth" - 2 Cor. 3:6). Not that we can have the Spirit and the life without the Word, but it can most certainly be the other way round.

It is so seriously important that we, and everything, shall be kept continuously in touch with the original source of life. Succession and continuation is *not* ecclesiastical, traditional, or of human choice and decision; it is certainly not policy, expediency, or fear. It is anointing - the anointed eye, ear, hand, and foot. It is a fire in the bones, not the obligations of a profession, association or idea.

The Spirit must have initiated our course and position. The Spirit must be referred to and deferred to all along the way. The Spirit will be a rebel in anything in which He may have His liberties limited; and if He is in us, He will make us such rebels. This does not for a moment mean that all rebellion and bid for what is called 'liberty' is of the Spirit. It just means that we are broken people in the realm of nature, and robbed of a power to fight for our own conceptions.

So it becomes just the issue of imprisonment to the Spirit, or something other or extra. It *must* be, at the greatest cost, and because the Spirit has done a deep and drastic thing in us -

"Here am I, I can do no other. So help me God."

(The above Editorial is largely suggested by the reading of an article (mostly political) by an English Member of Parliament, and published in 'The Spectator' in 1947. - Ed.)