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Email: info@austin-sparks.net

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Equipment for the Ministry

by T. Austin-Sparks

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"And Moses said unto the Lord, O my Lord, I am not eloquent... but I am slow of speech, and of a slow tongue" (Exodus 4:10).

"And the Lord... said go, and thou shalt save Israel... And he (Gideon) said, Oh, my Lord... behold... I am the least in my father's house" (Judges 6:14-15).

"Then said I, woe is me! for I am undone... And he (the Lord) said, Go..." (Isaiah 6:5,9).

"Then said I, Ah! Lord God! Behold, I cannot speak, for I am a child... The Lord said... Thou shalt go..." (Jeremiah 1:6-7).

"I was no prophet, neither was I a prophet's son... And the Lord took me... and said unto me, Go..." (Amos 7:14-15).

"And he appointed twelve that they might be with him, and that he might send them forth" (Mark 3:14).

"Ye shall receive power after that the Holy Spirit is come upon you, and ye shall be witnesses unto me" (Acts 1:8).

The last words quoted above are the answer to all the others. Although Pentecost marked a new epoch and method of the Holy Spirit's activity, yet throughout all time God's Work has been done through the Spirit's agency. Were we asked what is the essential and indispensable equipment for the work of God we would say unhesitatingly; The anointing and filling with the Holy Spirit!

In the instances cited above we have men of vastly different types, but they are all brought to a common basis. Moses was a man of tremendous natural and acquired ability. There was initiative, drive, passion, devotion and courage on the emotional and volitional side, linked with "all the wisdom of the Egyptians" on the intellectual side, and evidently considerable strength on the physical. Isaiah and Jeremiah were not without a wealthy endowment of inherited social, religious, and ecclesiastical advantages and good training. Then what need we say about Paul on this side? On the other hand, Gideon, Amos and most of the Apostles were of humble and simple birth, meagre education, and few worldly advantages. Of the latter it is recorded that "they were ignorant and unlearned men". All these, we have said, had to be brought to a common basis. Through painful and sometimes long drawn-out discipline and trial the former had to come to the place where they recognized that only God could do His own work, and that He never uses any man or his natural equipment except on the ground of an utter dependence upon Him: that gifts, training, ability as such do not count with God and are only of service when the man has been translated from a natural ground to a spiritual through the deep inworking of the Cross in its principles and laws. Nothing but spiritual endowments can meet spiritual forces, and this is the background of all the work of God.

God may use the gifts with which He has entrusted men by nature or acquisition, but not until they have been brought through death on the natural plane to life on the spiritual. Moses went that way; Paul went that way; and so have all who have really been used of God for *Spiritual* and *Eternal* ends; that is, if the worker as well as the work was to be accepted.

No one will think that we are against all-round training and equipment. Far be it from us to suggest that this is of no vital consequence. What we are emphasizing is that though given every possible natural or acquired endowment, education, natural ability, zeal, evangelical faith and doctrine, a knowledge of Christian work, etc., there may yet remain an essential without which all this is going to fail. This superlative factor is: "filled with the Holy Spirit".

On the other hand, a Spirit-filled man is never one who holds a brief for ignorance or despises and neglects such acquisitions of knowledge as will be ground upon which the Lord may work. It is one of the romances of the Spirit's activity that under His stimulation and quickening many of the most illiterate have become able and eager to master things for which they had neither desire nor ability before.

Now these simple basic things lead us on further. The Lord Jesus as

The Model Servant

declared: 'I do nothing of myself; as I hear I speak.' 'The words that I speak, I speak not from myself.' 'The works that I do, I do not from myself.' Here is even a sinless "myself" refusing to speak His own words or do His own works. He was deliberately hanging and drawing upon the Father for everything. It is clear that He realized that even in His own sinless case this was necessary, and to do otherwise was to lay His mission open to infinite peril from without. Thus it was an utterness of God.

For such an utterness - which, let us urge, must characterize all who are to most closely approximate to God's ideal servant - there must somewhere at some time be a zero point on man's side. This zero point is clearly seen in the life and ministry of so many of the Lord's servants - the time when despair of everything well-nigh engulfed them, and 'God was their only asset'.

But is it necessary that this point should only be reached at a more or less late stage in Christian life and service, after perhaps, years of activity? Should there be a considerable degree of ineffectiveness, failure and abortion because such a large percentage of the effort and activity is "in the flesh", or of man? It is necessary that at last, perhaps at long last, the big framework, the loud hammering, the feverish busyness, etc., should begin to fall away and the genuine spiritual and eternal result be comparatively small. We may settle it once and for all that *only what the Holy Spirit does will attain unto God's end and remain eternally.*

Surely God would have zero on man's side reached at the beginning! Surely this is according to the experience of men in Scripture! At least it was a definite registering of that point to which they were continually brought back if they tended to move beyond it in self-sufficiency.

This, we believe most earnestly to be the true nature of training for the Lord's work alongside of and in company with, a growing knowledge of Himself in His word and in experience. The only knowledge of the Word of God which is of any profit in service is experimental knowledge. That knowledge is the knowledge of God Himself which makes the Word live.

Moses was trained for His life work in the hard school of inaction. Forty years in a wilderness tending sheep for a man of a tremendously active disposition! He had set out with great visions. His motive was good and the end in view was right. His filling up of the outline, however, was mistaken. How to be patient with wrong without condoning it or losing a passion for right is one of the big lessons to be learned by those who would deliver men. Not to put a halo of romance about service for men and to think that there will be a due appreciation of one's self-sacrifice without becoming cynical by reason of disillusionment is another. Not in any way, manner, tone or conduct to suggest superiority is a third. These were some of the minor lessons which Moses had to learn, but they were themselves big ones. Dependence, faith, obedience, humility were the primary things, and these cannot be got from books or lectures.

Isaiah had to have a vision by which he was overwhelmed with his own unfitness.

Paul had to come off his intellectual, ecclesiastical, traditional, official high horse with a tremendous thud and grovel in the dust in subjection to the hated and despised "Jesus".

The disciples had to learn many lessons as to their own miserable inability to satisfy the heart of their Divine Master, and, at length, they all suffered the shame of having been proved incapable of believing through the cross.

This is all necessary training and preparation. How few there are who would voluntarily accept a course of training like this! But this surely ought to be the nature of the work done in a place for the preparation of God's servants. There should be a handing over to the Holy Spirit to take into and through all such experiences of spiritual discipline as are necessary to a deep knowledge of God. There should be the knocking of the bottom out of our ideas of work and service. There should be the making of everything inward and not outward; spiritual and not natural; from God and not from

ourselves. If needs be, there should be the discipline of inaction. It is so easy to be content if only we are busy and active, but often this only gets in God's way, and He has to take our work away in order to teach us that it is *Himself*, and not service as such. With many the Lord has to adopt a wearing-out policy, for they will not yield otherwise.

The Ideal School of the Prophets

The ideal 'School of the Prophets' is that in which the spiritual life has first consideration; where the Holy Spirit is dealing with the individual and where the Word of God is being made necessary for light, strength, comfort and direction. If we are going to live by the Word, the Word must live for us, and experience is the meeting-place of life and knowledge.

No training centre is adequate which is only intellectual and practical in the sense of doing work. There must be primarily the attention to the spiritual life, its nurturing and directing, and especially the presence of the Holy Spirit must be sought and guarded for that work which can never be done from without.

Now, having said all this, we come back to recognize that, in *principle*, this was the basis of the mighty activities of God from the time of the fulfilment of Acts 1:8. The Cross, in all its fullness, was brought by the Holy Spirit into the lives of those first believers and witnesses, and the change in the character of the apostles is most noticeable. They became selfless, humble, fearless, full of love, patience, and long-suffering. 'Position' or 'place', reputation, prestige, 'success', popularity, etc., no longer motivated their service. Note how on everything they are directed and controlled by the Spirit! The Lord is released when the bands of the self-life in all its forms in His servants are burnt up by the Fire. As through His Cross He came to His own personal liberation to the boundless so, as His Cross is planted deeply in the natural life of His servants, He is free to do His mightier works. Oh, that we could see early enough in our lives that when Christ went to the Cross He not only took our sins, but He took us! and that not just as sinners, but as men; as preachers, teachers, workers, and everything, so that "henceforth it is no longer I, but Christ". All too late some of us have had to be crucified in one or more of these capacities; and through death preaching has had to be put off the human level and born again from above. And the same with other things. Oh, for a new company of such who right at the beginning are put there! Then God will do His new thing and we shall see a fresh release of the Lord. He is not straitened in Himself, but He is straitened in the natural activities of His servants, which activities are brought over into spiritual things by the horizontal method instead of by the vertical - that is, along the human line, instead of by the Cross, the resurrection, ascension and descent from above.

As it was in the time of the types the strictest laws governed the anointing with the holy oil, and it was repeatedly stressed that "upon man's flesh shall not the oil come", so the Lord, who is no less particular today, will not give His Spirit to come upon man's "flesh" - man's self-life. All that must first come under the power of the Blood and be taken to the Cross to give the Spirit a clear way. The first witnesses had nothing to gain, but everything to lose in this life by even naming the Name of Jesus. There was nothing that could be in the slightest degree a sop for the senses. Those at Jerusalem lost everything very early and were scattered abroad. From without the Lord kept everything pure and free. But He never departs from His principle, His original premise, and where He is allowed He will work this state into the very spirit and life of His servant in order that all things may be of Himself, and "whatsoever God doeth it shall be for ever". The law of the corn of wheat most surely operates: enlargement through limitation, gain out of loss, life out of death.