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The Gospel of the Sovereignty

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: Matt. 28:1-10,16-20.

We are very familiar with these words of the Commission, and it may be that in bringing them to us now, the Lord desires to revive their power in our lives and renew their place with us.

We know, from comparing the different records of the Lord's words to His disciples after His resurrection, that it is not all given to us in chronological order, but rather (as seems to be almost a rule in the New Testament) in spiritual order. Here is an instance which carries with it a very great significance, perhaps the greatest significance, and which gives to the words of the Commission here their supreme importance and value.

You see, the meeting in Galilee really did not take place on the day of the resurrection, although it looks like it from this narrative. It must have been at some subsequent time, perhaps considerably later than the day of the resurrection. These words here in Matthew 28:19-20 must be subsequent to the words about the resurrection incidents recorded in all three of the other Gospels - Mark, Luke and John. We know that, on the day of the resurrection, He went on that walk to Emmaus and when they arrived at Emmaus the day was far spent, and because the day was far spent, the two would constrain Him to go in and tarry for the night, meaning that, as the night comes so suddenly with no twilight, there was hardly time to take any further journey, but after He had broken bread with them and their eyes had been opened, they had seen Him, they did go back to Jerusalem at such a pace that they evidently prevented the night and arrived in Jerusalem and found the other disciples gathered together in the Upper Room, broke in upon them breathlessly with their news, and there, while they were there in that Upper Room, Jesus stood in the midst. So it was not Galilee on the day

of the resurrection, and, what is more, Galilee was more than fifty miles from Jerusalem, and they would not walk that in a day.

Perhaps you are wondering what is the point. Well, the point is a very, very big one. It is this: that, while Mark, Luke and John record things which must have taken place before this word of the Lord to them in Galilee, and the words of commission recorded by Mark, Luke and John must have been uttered before these words in Matthew, these words do come first in the order of Divine arranging. Chronologically, we are all out of order; spiritually we are in perfect order.

The Proclamation of Christ as Lord

Why? Well, Matthew, as we so well know, had as his object in writing his Gospel, the setting forth of Christ as King, and when Matthew in a very short space of less than a whole chapter (because there is a parenthetical portion to this chapter about the rulers wanting a false story told and offering to cover the guard if they got into trouble, a parenthesis, it is a lump out of the chapter) in a very short portion right at the end of the Gospel, just speaking about one or two things that happened on the resurrection morning, has only this one tremendous thing to say. Jesus said, "All authority hath been given unto Me in heaven and on earth." He summed up his Gospel in that, the whole object of his writing: the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ; He is King, He is Lord. That becomes the first and all-governing note of the proclamation of the Gospel by the church. It is the church's first and all-inclusive message. Before anything else can be preached as to the Lord Jesus, He has got to be set forth as Lord, He has got to be recognized and acknowledged as Lord. That is the first great spiritual note of the church.

It proved to be that, as we know, in Acts, in the church's fulfilling of the great Commission, and so everything is in line with that in Matthew. Here, for instance, is this word twice repeated in this chapter, "They worshipped Him." The word "worship" there is the word which means total prostration as in the presence of sovereignty, of supremacy, and an interesting thing is this, that that word occurs about twelve times in Matthew and twelve times in John, and is almost totally absent from Mark and Luke. In Matthew, it is King, and you get total prostration twelve times. In John it is Deity; you get total prostration twelve times. In Mark it is the humble Servant; in Luke it is the Man; you do not get total prostration. "They worshipped Him." It is only just one, shall we say, sidelight upon the message, the meaning. "All authority hath been given unto Me in heaven and on earth. Go ye therefore, and disciple all the nations."

Let me repeat, the first note of the church's Gospel to all the nations is the absolute Lordship of Jesus Christ. It is not to go to China, Japan and India or anywhere else and compare the teaching of Jesus with the great teachers of those lands and try to show that His teaching is better. It is not to go with the ethic of Jesus, to try and elevate the people to a higher level of moral life. A lot of people are doing these things. It is not, in the first place, to go and preach Jesus as Saviour, which might, and very often only, results in people accepting Him for their own personal good and benefit, for the blessing that will come to them. They want to be happy, to be delivered from the misery into which they have fallen, sunken by sin, they want some escape for themselves, and so the Gospel is taken purely as something that is going to make life happier and more comfortable for people. No, the first note of the church is that Jesus is Lord, Jesus is King, Jesus is Sovereign, and anything else comes out of that. Your salvation is bound up with that; your elevation is bound up with that; everything is consequent upon that.

Going out to people, whether, as we put it, at home or abroad, wherever it is, and saying, "God has made Him, this Jesus, Whom ye crucified, both Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36); He is Sovereign,

demanding your absolute and total prostration, your surrender to Him, as you would never even surrender to an earthly monarch; He is to be Lord" - that is the church's first note. That is why we have it so ordered by the Holy Spirit that Matthew is right out of chronological order and takes precedence. It is the Divine and spiritual order. "All authority hath been given unto Me in heaven and on earth."

The Lordship of Christ must be an Inward Reality

Now, let us for a moment come back from objective and outward application, and see that, as we belong to that church, the thing has its first application to us, and we can never preach the Lordship of Christ only in so far as it is real in our own case, that really we are absolutely prostrate before His sovereignty. These disciples had to come there, and that is why they could not go out and fulfil the Commission till fifty days were past - forty days of His appearances, establishing the reality of His risen life and Lordship, that He was Lord, alive, and then ten days of prayer till the Spirit came and made that Lordship, that exaltation, an inward reality. Then they could go, but not before. It had to be something that was made real in them, and we know (and it is a large field of study or contemplation) we know how necessary it was in their case, how they had to bring their reason under that Lordship, and all their reasoning, all their natural mentality, their will and their feelings and emotions, everything, had to come under it.

Take just one thing outstandingly, because it is in the case of the most outstanding of this band - Peter. Peter, in his own mind and reason, did not see that Jesus was the Messiah, because everything seemed to the natural reason so contrary to all the expectations about a Messiah, that He would be manifestly a King, a great and powerful ruler Who would sweep in and overpower the enemies of God's people on this earth and deliver Israel, Who would bear all the marks of One sent by God and empowered by God, before Whom no one would be able to stand. That was the expectation for the Messiah, and much more. There was nothing about Jesus like that. The proof is this: that, when the Lord

challenged them as to Whom He was and Peter said, "Thou art the Christ" (which was only saying, "Thou art the Messiah, the Son of the living God", the Lord said, "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jonah: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 16:16-17).

In spite of that Divine revelation of the fact, and Peter's own spontaneous confession, when the Lord speaks of going up to Jerusalem and being delivered into the hands of the rulers and being killed, Peter breaks in: "Be it far from Thee, Lord: this shall never be unto Thee"; and the Lord says, "Get thee behind me, Satan: thou art a stumbling-block unto Me: for thou mindest not the things of God, but the things of men" (Matt. 16:22-23). Peter has most positively denied his own confession. Why? His reason is not conquered, is not yet subject, and he would still move on that ground in spite of the revelation. He is not a conquered man inside, and he would presently deny the Lord. How could he deny One Whom he was so sure was God's Messiah, God's Christ? He was not conquered until afterwards through the cross.

I just pick that out as an illustration. We may get glimpses of revelation, we may see in a flash some of the great things which only the Lord can show, and still the absolute mastery of our inner life and subjection may not have taken place, and we are not therefore in the way of the service of the Lord, the work of the Gospel; we cannot be used in the great commission. That commission is based upon His Lordship made good in those commissioned. Can the Lord do exactly as He likes with us? Will we say, do we say, and mean it: "Lord, I have no plans for my life produced by my own desires, reasonings, preferences; I know what I would like but, Lord, all that is entirely handed over to Your

Lordship; it is what You want me to do, to be, where You want it to be, how You want it, when You want it, it is all for You to make the plan, to have the government". "My master, lead me to Thy door, pierce this now willing ear...". You know the figure.

Lord in the Realm of Sin

Well now, that is where we begin with the great commission - the absolute sovereignty of the Lord Jesus, which is to be the first note of the church's commission. It has got to be a thing established in the church, and that means influence. "All authority..." that word translated "power" in the Authorized Version, perhaps you know so well, is not the word which means "force". It means "right to rule", "right to govern". All right: to govern, to rule, has been given unto Him, and in the original tense, it is this, "has just been given unto Me", and that gets us into the meaning of things still further.

What is the nature of the right to rule just conferred upon the Lord Jesus? How was it that it was just conferred upon Him? For one or two reasons. Firstly, His resurrection was His vindication as sinless. He had claimed to be without sin, and rulership in God's Kingdom demands that - sinlessness. God is going to have no unholy ruler in His kingdom; no unrighteous one can occupy the throne of His creation. He claimed to be without sin, "Though tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). Jesus had a human nature, and He was not a human being. There is a vast deal of difference. He was different from all human beings in this respect - He was without sin. But He was subjected to the full force of every test and temptation, and was made sin for us in the hour of His cross. "He who knew no sin was made sin for us" (2 Cor. 5:21) and triumphed, did not yield in one detail or respect or for one instant, and His resurrection was God's seal upon His sinlessness, so that He could say in the hour of His resurrection, "All authority has just been given to Me."

It was in resurrection that the all authority was given to Him, because His resurrection was God's seal upon His absolute sinlessness, and you can go and preach this One as Lord for that reason. He is Lord of sin, He is Master of all iniquity, He has subdued all unrighteousness, He is above all iniquity, and therefore He is Lord. His Lordship is not official: it is spiritual and moral. His sovereignty is not just by official appointment, it is in virtue of what He is. Men are not called upon to bow to Jesus of Nazareth as their Lord because He is a great man, because He is a great teacher, because He is better than all other men, prophets and leaders. They are called upon to subject themselves to Him because He is above all question as to His nature and character. He is outside

of the realm of ordinary humanity. We are not bringing in the super-man; we are not bringing in someone who stands head and shoulders above other men as a man. We are bringing in someone Who is outside of the whole realm of this humanity. He is not a human being in the sense that we are human beings; though having a human nature, He is outside. It is another humanity, a different humanity, from ours. Until we recognise that, we have not got the Gospel for this world. It is another humanity, another human nature that is not known in this creation, into which we are to be incorporated and to which we are to be conformed.

And that does not take place all of a sudden; in an act, we are joined to the Lord one spirit (1 Cor. 6:17), and then the process begins of dealing with the sin question in the light of His perfection, and the great power by which the sin question is dealt with is His sinlessness. That is what we mean when we take the loaf on the Lord's day. We are taking His body, a sinless body. We are saying in effect, "We appropriate another humanity and make that humanity the basis of our life". It is like bread; the power of conforming to His life is our feeding upon Him. If we are feeding upon One Who

is of our own humanity, we will be like that. To feed upon Christ is to feed upon another order of being altogether outside of ourselves.

While that may seem deep, profound, mysterious, therein lies the great power of the church's message, that Christ is of another order outside of this one altogether, and men have got to recognise the utter supremacy and "otherness" of the Lord Jesus and bow to that: that has to dominate. He is Lord in the realm of sin.

Lord in the Realm of Access to God

Then His resurrection was the seal upon His incarnation and gave Him the right to bring men to God. He had claimed that God was in Him, He had said very utter things about He and the Father being one, meaning that the incarnation is nothing else than God having come in human form, that here in man form God is found, God and man are joined together. We know all the types of the Old Testament about that - the gold and the acacia wood and so on - God and man joined together. His resurrection is the seal upon that, is God's attestation to that, that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself (2 Cor. 5:19). God attested that by raising Him from the dead, that here is One Who is so vitally with God that they are one - not two, but one; and that means that He has the position, the right, to bring men to God in Himself. That is His Lordship. It is the Lordship or the authority and right, by reason of what He is as so utterly one with God, to bring men to God, that no man comes to the Father but by Him (John 14:6). No man can come to God but by Jesus Christ. He is in that position. The Father has bound up with Him man's right to come to God. That is the Gospel. You cannot reach God other than through Jesus Christ. He is Lord in this realm of access to God. He governs this whole matter of union with God. That authority was given Him in resurrection.

Lord over the Power of the Enemy

Then thirdly, His resurrection was His vindication in the matter of the powers of darkness, the prince of this world. He made the claim that, as He went to the cross, the prince of this world was about to be cast out. "Now is the prince of this world cast out" (John 12:31). "And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto Myself" (John 12:32). The prince of this world had been drawing men to himself and away from Christ. That power of the prince of this world is now being challenged, and the power to draw men is vested in Christ - a superior power to the power of the Devil. When God raised Christ from the dead, He put His seal upon that, and so soon after, that power began to operate, on the day of Pentecost and after. Men so dominated by dead works, and men so in the grip of the Devil that the Lord

could say about the Jewish leaders, of which Paul was one, "Ye are of your father the devil" (John 8:44) - such a power could be broken in a moment on the Damascus road by the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Power over all the power of the enemy, the casting out of the prince of this world - that is the authority vested in Him.

Believe me, the church's weakness and ineffectiveness is largely due to the fact that the church does not stand on that ground. It stands on Christian ground, Christian truths and creeds - yes, the doctrines or the truths, the historical facts of Christ's death and resurrection and ascension and Lordship, but not in the spiritual power of it so that the church can challenge the power of darkness with the Lordship of Christ. There is a great deal of difference. That is why the church has lost out.

The Commission and Promise to the Church

"Now," says the Lord Jesus in effect, "because Lordship is Mine over sin, because Lordship is Mine to bring men to God, and Lordship is Mine over all the power of Satan, go and preach! That is your commission, that is your Gospel" that, He says to the church, and remember, this is a church thing, for everything that God has in view is corporate first and then individual, not individual first and then corporate. That is our way of putting it. With God it is corporate. Redemption is corporate; God has redeemed the whole creation, and if men are never saved, it will not be because they are not redeemed, it will be because they have not accepted the redemption which was theirs. The work is done. There will be many redeemed people in hell. They were redeemed, but they counted the Blood of the everlasting covenant an unworthy thing. It was their salvation, but they did not take advantage of it.

Redemption is corporate, everything is first corporate with God; and then, to realise the whole, it is applied to the individual. It is the church's work and the individual comes into the work in the church. This commission has been made so detached and such a personal thing. If it was seen that this is the church's business and not the business of some people in the church, the church being one thing and missionaries from the church being another, if it were seen that this is the church's business as a whole, there would be a great deal more strength about it. In the beginning, it was the church's business, and the whole church was in the commission.

The last word is, "And lo, I am with you all the days, even unto the consummation of the age... I am with you unto the consummation of the age" - this age in which this commission is to be carried out. The promise is contingent upon the fulfilment of the commission. We have no right to expect the presence of the Lord unless we are doing the thing that the Lord said we should do in order to secure His presence. The Lord's presence all the days to the consummation of the age is bound up with the commission, and His presence is the power for fulfilling the commission, and the power is not available, only as we are in the commission. Do we want to know the presence of the Lord as the power? Let us get on with the business. If we are not doing that, it does not matter how much we are occupied with the Lord's things, the power is not present. Find any people occupied with themselves, even though it be with teaching, deeper teaching, there is no power; the power disappears. There is nothing wrong in being occupied with all that the Lord would reveal, but it has got to be of practical account in an outward way, otherwise there is no power. It has got to be committed to the world or the power is lacking.

The Lord find us as those who in the first place are utterly prostrate worshippers in this sense: at His feet as Lord over reason, mind, will, heart, over things, over everything; and then out of that may He be able to press us out, here or there or wherever He will, with the Gospel of the Sovereignty.