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The Word, the Work and the World

by T. Austin-Sparks

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(A message given to young Christians in October 1970)

I have been wondering if I could define and sum up your conference in three words, and I think I have them: the Word, the Work and the World. We are going to speak a little about these, but first we will read some fragments of Scripture.

"And the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us" (John 1:14). The word "tabernacled", which is used in the margin of the English Revised Version, is the correct translation here.

"This gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a testimony unto all the nations; and then shall the end come" (Matthew 24:14).

I am going to re-translate that verse into what is perhaps a more literal and true translation:
"This good news of the sovereign reign shall be preached in the whole world to set the evidence." We will come back to that later.

"This is the sum of the things for the tabernacle, even the tabernacle of the testimony" (Exodus 38:21).

1. The Word

We begin with the Word, because that is the basis of everything. Everything must be according to the Word, out from the Word, and governed by the Word. The Work, which comes next, is the purpose, or expression, of the Word. Then comes the World, which is the sphere in which the Word has to have its expression.

Perhaps I should say that I am treating you as a group of students and am not preaching to a congregation, so I am expecting that you will follow quite closely every word that I say, for I am weighing up my words very carefully and there is a great deal more behind them than there seems to be on the surface.

As far as the Word is concerned - and I am now referring to the Scriptures - we must always look at any fragment of Scripture in its wider context. Do remember that, when you come to read any part, any sentence, even any single word of the Scriptures, because it is the Word of God it has a much wider context than the thing itself. It is not just a word, or a sentence, or a verse, or a portion of Scripture, in itself. It has a much greater setting, and you will be greatly helped, and it will be of really vital consequence, if you can see that wider context. In other words, look for the fuller content of any part of the Scripture, for it has much more in it than lies on the surface. There is an inexhaustible depth in anything that proceeds from God. Indeed, if it is true that the Bible, the Scriptures, are God-breathed, inspired of God, coming out of God, then they are as full as God Himself. There is not a little mind behind that word, that sentence, that statement or that argument. It is God's mind, and that mind is inexhaustible. You will never fathom its depths, but it is there in every fragment.

Please try to remember that when you are reading the Word of God. Do not just read on and on, but take it fragment by fragment and seek to see both its wider context and its fuller content.

That is not just technical. I am speaking to you as one who has been with this Word of God for over sixty years, and I have found this to be of immense value. You see, the Bible has been preached and taught for some two thousand years now, but at the end of that time there is still something new to be found in just a fragment, as far as words are concerned. Take any one of these texts, so-called, on which people preach. You may have heard hundreds of messages on it, and if you are as old as I am, you will have heard preaching on it many times in many parts of the world, but, you know, it is never exhausted. There is always something new and fresh about that well-known bit of Scripture. How often we hear someone get up and announce his text, and our reaction is: "Oh, we know that one! We have often heard people talk about that one!" but, if the person speaking is really under the anointing, before he or she is through we have got something quite new on that old, well-worn bit of Scripture which we have heard so many times before. I am enunciating something of tremendous importance. This that comes out from God, is as big as God Himself, and can you exhaust God? Can you really get to the end of God's mind? Never! Indeed, after all our years, however many they may be, we are saying to ourselves: "Well, when I get to glory I am going to ask for an explanation of that bit of Scripture that I have known so well. I am going to ask Paul what he meant by that statement, and the Lord what He meant by that one. I know there is something more there that I have not been able to fathom."

I need not labour this, but I want to stress, first of all in relation to the Word, that its depth and its fullness are quite inexhaustible because it comes from God, and therefore it is as full as God Himself.

We are going to take an example. Our first passage was John 1:14: "And the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us." The Greek word "logos" is used, so we have: "And the Word, the logos, became flesh and tabernacled among us." Let us break it up. "The Word, the personal expression of God, *became* flesh" - not "always was", but *became*, and that is a point, a time in eternity. We do not know when it happened exactly in the mind of God, but, of course, we know the date in history. But there was a juncture, a crisis, a terminal point between the pre-existence of the Word which was God in the beginning and His becoming flesh - "and *tabernacled* among us." As I have already said, that is the correct translation, for that same word is used many times in the Scriptures. The last time is in the book of the Revelation: "The tabernacle of God is with men" (21:3).

Now we begin to open out. John is writing his Gospel with a full Jewish background, and I suggest that you get down to that Gospel and track down carefully every allusion to the life, history and constitution of Israel. You will have to search very closely, but you will find that it is all there. Where does he begin? "...and *tabernacled* among us." "He took up His residence in a tent." The Greek word cannot be exactly translated into English, for it would sound too awkward if I said: "and entented among us." You see, John is right back with Israel in the wilderness where we read of "the tabernacle of the testimony". The tabernacle is in John's mind, for it is part of this whole Jewish system which lies behind all that he is writing. He has a lot to say about the system, and you will find that he speaks about the manna in the wilderness, and Jacob's well. Yes, it is all there.

John has this whole Jewish life and constitution at the back of his mind as he is writing, and he begins with the tabernacle. In effect, what he is saying, or meaning, is that what the tabernacle in the wilderness was long ago, Jesus is now. He has supplanted that tabernacle. It is dismissed and He has taken its place. The great transition has taken place. Presently the temple will come up in the same way with the woman of Samaria: "Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say, that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship" (John 4:20). Jesus said: "Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall ye worship the Father." What has happened? Mount Gerizim, the temple of the Samaritans, has been dismissed, and the great temple in Jerusalem has been dismissed. Someone has taken their place. Well, as I have suggested, read through this Gospel again and mark as many of the allusions to Israel's life and history as you can.

We return to the tabernacle. First of all, God commanded: "And let them make me a sanctuary, that I may dwell among them" (Exodus 25:8), so the object of it was: "that I may *dwell* among them." This is the same word again, although it is in Hebrew, and God was really saying: "that I may *tabernacle* among them."

Then look at the making of this tabernacle. It is a revelation from heaven, and nothing whatever is left to the inventiveness or judgment or thought or imagination of man. The pattern is given in the Mount, and you notice the meticulous and scrupulous exactness of God over this. "According to all that I shew thee, the pattern of the tabernacle, and the pattern of all the furniture thereof, even so shall ye make it" (Exodus 25:9). Nothing was left to man. Man, with all his imaginative, emotional, intellectual capabilities, is ruled out, set aside. He has no place in the making of this tabernacle. God is very particular, so much so that when two of Aaron's sons made incense which was not according

to the prescription, it was called “false fire”. It was not according to the prescription given by God, so He came down and you know what happened. It meant complete destruction, the obliteration of everything in this connection that was not God’s thought or mind, but was of *man*.

Why this very stringent jealousy of God over this tabernacle? Because His thought does not begin and end with this thing called the tabernacle. His thought is so much bigger, fuller and greater than anything that can be measured. And what is God’s thought? Nothing less and nothing other than His own Son, Jesus Christ, and every detail of this tabernacle in the wilderness symbolically, and of the Person in incarnation actually, is meticulously according to God’s mind. This is the One who came and tabernacled. There is a detailed, scrupulous correspondence with the mind of God, and that was what was governing the tabernacle in the wilderness. In God’s intention, mind and thought that tabernacle was an expression, a representation of the Lord Jesus in His character and nature.

That is the fuller content of: “The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us.” So, you see, we cannot just go on reading the Bible on and on! We have to get this fuller, wider context, and the far greater setting of each fragment.

Well, that is the Word, and remember that you cannot go on with the Work until you have got that, because there is so very much that is of man’s conception, genius, idea, imagination and activity in the things of God, but God is not dwelling in all that. He is not there, for the very object has been lost or missed. To put that in another way: If God is going to come in, tabernacle, reside, be present, everything must be according to Christ. How meticulous Christ was Himself about that! He had His Father’s mind, and here in John 5 you will hear Him saying: “The Son can do nothing *out from* Himself”. That is what the Greek says, not “of himself”. You see how you have to weigh every little word! What is coming out from us? “The Son can do nothing out from himself, but what he seeth the Father doing: for what things soever he doeth, these the Son also doeth in like manner” (verse 19). “The works that I do, I do not out from Myself. The words that I speak, I speak not out from Myself. It is the Father that speaketh, and it is the Father that doeth the works.” He is in touch with the ultimate thought of God in every detail. Was God in Christ? Has history proved that God came in through that One? Well, you have the answer to that.

That is the Word, which governs and is the basis of everything, but we must go on.

2. The Work

What is the work of God? You, of course, are very concerned about the work of God. Now, please do not quote me out of context. You are concerned with the salvation of souls, and that is quite right, *but...*, and when I put a “but” in it means that there is a question. You are concerned with the spreading of the Gospel. Quite right, *but...* What are you concerned with? I’m sure you can make a list of answers to that question. Why are you here at all? Why are you a Christian? Why are you going out to the various places to which you are going? Perhaps you would comprehend it all in this one sentence: “I am going out in the work of the Lord. I have committed myself and my life to the work of the Lord.” Please, what do you mean? These answers that you will give may be quite right as far as they go, and yet this “but” is there, and it is a very challenging “but”. It might be a very devastating “but”, for it might put us right out of our work. It might be a “but” that causes the Lord to lay us aside from His work for a time. This “but” may account for so many things.

What is the work of the Lord, dear friends? Will you take this to heart? Again, please do not say that I have said: "The work of the Lord is not to preach the Gospel, and not the salvation of souls", for I have said: "Yes, it is" to those. These are means, but they are not the end. They are the means to an end. What is the work of the Lord? What does our passage of Scripture indicate?

"The Word was made flesh and tabernacled among us." Why did Jesus Christ come into the world in the flesh? To save men? Yes. To bring men to God? Yes. To make known the Kingdom of God? Yes. But is that all? Are those ways, or are they the end? Again, I ask the question: What is the work of the Lord?

The work of the Lord is to bring God into His place in this world. That is all. In your being where you are, in your being a Christian and a servant of the Lord, in your preaching the Gospel or in your doing any of these things which make up the sum of your work, the challenge, the test is this: Is God present? When we meet one another, do we meet the Lord, or do we meet an enterprise, an undertaking, a piece of work, an organisation, or a lot of people interested in a *thing*? Is the presence and the impact of our life the impact of God upon a situation?

Let us come to our passage in Matthew 24: "This good news of the sovereign reign shall be proclaimed in every nation in order to *set the evidence*". In the Greek, the word is "testimony", or "witness", and you know what a witness is - one who has a testimony. In no court of law anywhere will the judge allow you to say: "Now, I *heard* this. I *was told* that. I *believe* that it was so and so. I *read* it." To that the judge will say: "My dear man, I do not want to hear what you heard, what you think, what you believe or what you read. I want first-hand evidence. Reading and hearing is second-hand and I do not accept that as evidence." Do you not think that this is challenging where our witness, our testimony is concerned? The fact that you are in a situation is evidence of what? "This good news of the sovereign reign proclaimed in all the nations to set the evidence" - and of what is the evidence? That this earth is God's by right. "This earth, and this patch upon which both my feet stand, is God's, and not the devil's, nor man's. It is God's by right of creation and by right of redemption." If you take that position you have God on your side.

That has been the battle all the way through. It began when Abel took the position with an altar, testifying that this earth is the Lord's by right, not only of creation (Cain got as far as that!), but of redemption, by right of precious blood. And the devil came out and slew him - and yet, did he? "He being dead yet speaketh" (Hebrews 11:4).

We come to Noah. By this time the whole creation has been wiped out, except for those few in the ark. Then they came out, emerging from judgment, death and destruction, and the first thing that Noah did was to build an altar upon the regenerated, renewed earth. In so doing, he said: "The earth is the Lord's." Men had robbed God of His place. The imagination of every heart was evil and men would not have God in their thoughts, so He said: "That is not what I created the world for. I created it for Myself, for *MY* dwelling and tabernacling." So Noah put up an altar and there the Lord's rights were recognised.

Abraham went up and down the land, and wherever he put his feet he built an altar, and in so doing he was saying: "This belongs to God. His rights of creation and redemption are represented here."

We think of Moses. Israel came out to be constituted a nation by way of an altar, which was constructed on the threshold of every dwelling, for that was where the lamb was slain. From the

basin which caught the blood of the lamb on the threshold a circle was made, which meant that that home and that family were encircled with blood, and out through that circle of blood they emerged as God's nation. It was by way of an altar. They may not have understood all this, but the meaning was: "We are the *LORD'S!* We are redeemed by precious blood. The Lord's rights are recognised and acknowledged by our very existence, for all the first-born of the Egyptians have died. Our survival is on the ground of redeeming blood, for we are the Lord's."

You go on through the Old Testament, and all these altars were leading up to the great altar of the Cross which included, comprehended them all with one inclusive, comprehensive meaning. What was the battle of Calvary? Well, you can say many things about it - atonement for our sins, and so on - but all that is included in one thing: the rights of God in this world were being fought out in the Cross. You are not surprised, then, that when that battle has been fought, the cosmic forces against God having His place have been stripped off and the battle of God's rights has been settled by redeeming blood, the next great event in the history of this world is that heaven opened and down came the Holy Spirit to tabernacle in the church, the new tabernacle of God, the corporate Body of Christ. God is here, and now the work of God is to set the evidence, that is, to bring the Lord into His place.

Sometimes you can do no more than stand. Many of the Lord's servants have been able to do nothing more than just stand where the Lord put them, "withstand, and having done all, to stand". Sometimes they are not able to preach, not able to do what they call the work of the Lord. Let us get that straightened out, for sometimes to be unmovable and stand for God's rights in a place is the greatest service that we can do for the Lord.

Well, this ought to revolutionise our idea of the Lord's work! What is it? Much more ought to be said, but it is simply bringing the Lord in where we are.

I expect you have principles that you have been enunciating in this conference and at other times, but this is one upon which I want to put an emphasis. The principle of this work of God is a corporate principle, and no one worker ought to be left alone. The minimum requisite of the New Testament in the work of God is two. Be careful about isolating yourself, detaching yourself. The devil will make a mess of you and the testimony if he can get you isolated. This standing together is a representation of the principle of the Body of Christ, and Paul said that the body is not just one member. Always watch this corporate principle, because sometimes, if we have not got another alongside to stand with us, we will go under. We need one another to stand together.

This is devastating and challenging. It says to me continually: "Does it work out that the result of your being here, as a Christian, as a so-called servant of God, is more of the Lord? Because you have come this way, because you have been here, does it mean that there is more of the Lord?" Oh, how much we can be taken up with what we call the work, and the Lord is expressed so little! That is why I said that the Lord Jesus was so meticulous and scrupulous in seeing that everything was according to the mind of God. Take that to heart!

3. The World

The testimony of God and His sovereign rights - which is only another way of speaking of the Kingdom - are to be planted in every nation. It is not that every nation is to be saved in its entirety in this dispensation, but the testimony is there to set the evidence in all the world.

That, of course, will open the door for a lot more to be said - and my time has gone! But why was that tabernacle in the wilderness right at the centre of a nation? What was it for? And if you look at the terrible tragedy of Israel, why were they set aside, why have there been these two thousand years in which they have been in what the New Testament calls "the outer darkness"? It was because their testimony in the nations broke down. They were raised up, constituted and governed by God and by heaven in order that in the nations it should be known that God has the rights in this world, by creation and redemption. Israel's presence was meant to be, in effect, the presencing of God. So, when the purpose is lost the thing is dismissed. God will have no more use for an enterprise when its purpose is lost and He will dismiss it. And the purpose is the bringing in of Christ. That was the history of Israel, and it is the history of many things in which the Lord manifested Himself, but which eventually lost the purpose of their existence. They went out on other lines and other things, and have been dismissed by God, like the tent in Shiloh, which became an empty shell, and like the temple in Jerusalem, wrecked and ruined, and dismissed from God's purpose, for its object was lost.

Shall we pray: "Lord, don't let that happen to me! Don't let the thing for which You have brought me to Yourself lose its purpose and I no longer bring You in. Does my presence mean Your presence?" Let us pray like that, for there must be the impact of God.

That is the Word, that is the Work, and that is what we are in the World for. You are going to be scattered among the nations, and what are you going to do? You will preach; yes, it has to be proclaimed. You will labour, you will suffer and you will be very busy, I am sure, but remember this: There must be that life in secret with God which means that when you come out from the sanctuary, the secret place with God, the presence of God is with you and registering just where you are, and if men are insensitive, the devil won't be! He knows where the Lord is. He is the arch-enemy of God and of God having a foothold in this world. He is the prince of this world and is not going to tolerate any interference with his kingdom without a fight.

Yes, bringing the Lord in has been a battle all the way through, but this is the work of the Lord, and this is what we are here for.