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Email: info@austin-sparks.net

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## The Increase of Spiritual Capacity

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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"I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now. Howbeit..." (John 16:12).

"I could not speak unto you as spiritual... I fed you with milk, not with meat... not even now are ye able" (1 Corinthians 3:1-2).

"Ye are straitened in your own affections... Be ye enlarged" (2 Corinthians 6:12-13).

"...we have many things to say, and hard of interpretation, seeing ye are become dull of hearing... Ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you the rudiments" (Hebrews 5:11,12).

In the light of a wide and long knowledge, from far East to far West, of Christians and Christian work, were I asked what I most strongly feel to be the greatest - or one of the greatest - needs of our time, I should not hesitate to say: An increase of spiritual capacity. Note - I say *spiritual*. Not intellectual. The desire, pursuit of, and provision for education and knowledge outbounds all that has ever been. The range of the intellectual and scientific was never so great. Nor is there lacking anything in the realm of the emotional. This is an excessively emotional and passionate age, both in quest and provision. The world is living on its emotions and passions, and in Christianity everything is done and provided to gratify the emotional senses.

Further, there is no straitness and limitation in the area of activity, of doing. The programme of Christian works, movements, enterprises, occupations, is so full as to leave no time for quiet thought and meditation. All of these three realms make up the soul, the ego - mind, emotion, will - and this is an age of the immense and intense assertion of the ego, the soul of man; Christians not excepted.

But in all this, and what an all it is, we repeat our conviction that a paramount need is of the increase of spiritual capacity. The shallowness and superficiality of spiritual capacity is nothing less than tragic and pathetic. The cheap, the easy, the quick, the glamorous, the popular; these are the features of our time which characterize so much of Christianity. It is the way of the world, and it has invaded the Church and organized Christianity. Depth and stamina, painstaking endurance, are a lost dimension. The passages of Scripture with which we introduce this consideration indicate that this lack of spiritual capacity has been a problem from the time when Jesus was on earth. He was handicapped and limited by it. It was necessary for Him to keep in reserve "many things" that He had, and wanted to say. The lack of spiritual capacity imposed a "cannot" upon His ministry. At another time He expressed this sense of frustration in a spontaneous ejaculation: "And, oh, how am I straitened!" (Luke 12:50). The Scriptures mentioned also show that the same problem distressed the Apostles. Said Paul: "I could not speak unto you as unto spiritual", implying that he longed for a breakthrough into the realm of the "eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, neither hath it entered into the heart of man... but God hath revealed unto us..." What great and potent things were withheld because of lack of capacity! Whoever wrote the Letter to the Hebrews was deeply troubled because of that arrested or retarded development which made him say with a touch of bitterness: "We have many things to say, but...", and then explained that he could not go beyond the "rudiments". The fact that this was a malady even in apostolic times surely does not condone or excuse it in our days. The most that such a reflection can do is to relieve us of some of the surprise. But we shall feel the same limitation and frustration if we know that the Lord has given us something which has no free way because of limited capacity on the part of God's people. It makes the going so hard and wearing! It will not do, however, to sit down with the fact, whether it be then or now. We have to uncover

### **The Causes of Limited Capacity**

Of course, when children are children, and rightly so, we have no greater requirement than to speak to them as such, and not to expect more of them than is right and proper. But our Scriptures relate to an un-normal, sub-normal, or even abnormal state. Behind them is an expectation that creates an element of shame, reproach, and even scandal. There *ought* to be capacity, and there is not. The greater fullnesses are available, but the channel is blocked, or the vessel is not empty or open. Do our Scriptures throw any light on the causes of this limitation, which is spiritual tragedy? In both our Lord's case and in the Letter to the Hebrews the cause is similar. It is

#### **(1) The Blockage of a Fixed Tradition**

In both cases it was the impassable barrier of Judaism. But let us at once understand that Judaism is not exclusively Judaistic, it is an incorrigible propensity, tendency, disposition, or habit. There is as much Judaism in principle in Christianity as ever there was in Israel. God has never done a new thing but in time men have crystallized it into a set form of teaching and practice. Sooner or later a label, a tag, a name is taken or given to it, and that is that! It becomes a tradition, and the tradition reigns supreme, until God exposes it. That tradition makes its victims incapable of accepting and adjusting to any new light, any Holy Spirit innovations. The real nature and cause of such a situation is a misapprehension of God's ways. It was true that God chose Israel to be His "Peculiar people", and separated them from all the nations. But Israel misunderstood this sovereign act of God. They reasoned that, in so doing, God had chosen them *alone* unto salvation, and thus had for ever closed the door firmly against all other people. The truth was that God's act was with the intention of showing to all men what is His way, basis, and provision for salvation. Israel should have been a missionary nation, *bringing* God to the ungodly! How God laboured, through His servants, to make Israel know that *they were no better* than other peoples, but rather needed as much mercy as any on

earth. This was not only said to them, but demonstrated in their own history. Theirs should have been the servant spirit marked by deep humility and indebtedness. But it became just the opposite in extreme. They lost everything! Now, the disciples of Christ inherited that superior nature and set the fixed bounds of God's grace. "The Kingdom to Israel" was the 'be all and end all' of their traditional horizon. They just could not accept a larger purpose.

If there is one thing being emphasized by God in our time it is that He must be given an open way to lead beyond even that which may have been of Himself in a provisional way, to say nothing of the necessity to let go our finalities as to the means and methods which He employs.

The New Testament makes plain that the warfare for the *full* inheritance takes on its most intense and fierce form in relation to deliverance from bondage to tradition.

## **(2) The Embargo on "Flesh and Blood"**

This may sound a strange heading, but it is not strange in the New Testament. It occurs more than once in that form, but it has a considerable contextual enlargement. It is a phrase which relates to and embraces all that man is apart from regeneration and the new creation. A classic example is Nicodemus in John chapter 3. It is still more fully explained and defined in the First Letter to the Corinthians, and, in particular, chapters 2 and 3. It is man in the old creation, sometimes referred to as "Natural" (Greek: soulical); sometimes as carnal, i.e. 'fleshly'. Its first occurrence is in Matthew 16:17. Wherever the actual words are used, or their meaning enlarged upon, there is always the embargo which says "cannot". So Paul said: "The natural man cannot..." He might just as well have said: "Flesh and blood cannot", because he did actually use the phrase in 1 Corinthians 15:15: "Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God."

Jesus drew the line of demarcation and distinction, as well as incapacity, when He said to Peter: "Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 16:17).

Now the fact and the force of this embargo is seen so fully in the case of the Corinthians. They - or a large number of them - were living on that side of their human nature which was not regenerated; their "old man"; the other-than-Christ side. On that side their judgments, their behaviour, their disposition, were those of this world and its ways. Hence their spiritual immaturity, arrested growth, sub-normal capacity. It all speaks for itself and needs very little enlarging upon.

From all this failure and tragedy in the case of both Israel and Corinth, the truth is clearly and strongly written that such painful history is the result of an unnecessary limitation of spiritual capacity.

But when we have said all that, we must go deeper and find what the record shows to be causes and the remedy.

### **The Secret of Enlarged Capacity**

The turning-point upon which the Lord laid the release from the disability was in a single word: "Howbeit" ... "Many things to say, but ye cannot bear it now. Howbeit..." "Howbeit, when the Spirit of truth is come." Incapacity gives way to capacity by the advent of the Holy Spirit. That, of course, is a statement which we all believe as a doctrine, and as evidenced in the life of the disciples. There is no mistaking it where they were concerned. But that is not all of the truth. The Holy Spirit *HAD* come in the time of the Corinthians, and they had received Him. But still their spiritual capacity was limited.

The explanation is found in the ground demanded by the Holy Spirit for His work of enlargement. In the case of the disciples the Cross meant a devastating work in *THEM*. That crisis gave the Holy Spirit the way to that tremendously enlarged capacity which we see in them on, and after, the Day of Pentecost. But the principle of the Cross had to apply even after that. They were Jews, and the Jewish tradition was not thrown off easily. Peter had a battle over the Gentile Cornelius, but the Spirit won on the basis of the Cross. The Corinthians were Gentiles and had their own battleground. They had had a crisis, but had understood the Cross in only a limited way. This is implied by Paul when he said: "When I came unto you... I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:1,2).

The issue, then, is that increase of spiritual capacity can only come by way of suffering. That is - the Cross. The suffering may be disillusionment as to our own ability, as with Peter. It may be parting from some very strong religious ideas, associations and sentiments. It may be the breaking of our own natural selves, the strong self-life. Be what and how it may, in no realm of creation is there enlargement and increase without suffering. This is most true in the Christian life. It is only those who have suffered who have most to give, and who have capacity for more.

This, then, surely explains God's sovereignty in allowing us suffering. Suffering is not meant by God to be loss and deprivation. Satan says that it is. God means suffering to result in increased spiritual capacity, and spiritual capacity is the basis of added responsibility, trust, and fruitful ministry.

The branch of the Vine may bleed from the drastic pruning and feel stripped of much glory; but more and better fruit is the Divine Vinedresser's vindication.