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"Watchman, What of the Night?"

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Everyone who has read history, and especially Church history, knows how true it is that people have very often thought of their own time as being the most significant or even critical of all times. The language of crisis has characterized many periods and phases of human life and the course of the world. Many such times while they lasted were regarded as the *most* epochal of all times. Some have certainly been outstandingly revolutionary. We may, or we may not, be right in regarding this present part of the twentieth century as more outstanding and significant than other times, but we should be blind indeed did we not recognise the tremendous changes that are so rapidly taking place.

This is true in the realm of all the sciences, in politics, industry, and not least in Christianity (we use the word in its broadest sense at the moment). The features will be easily recognisable by those who have eyes and are willing to use them honestly, neither closing them nor putting on blinkers. But it is not only these changes in themselves but their significance that God's Watchmen ought to recognise. A great responsibility rests upon Watchmen, as we know from Ezekiel 33. Note, we say *Watchmen*, not watch-dogs. It is easy and cheap to take on the role of the watch-dog and yap or bark at any 'suspect', or even bite indiscriminately. It is different to be really able to discern the portents or implications of developments.

We venture to suggest the following as being significant of a time of very great portent. It may be that it is no other or less than the end-time of this dispensation.

1. God's Big-Scale Net of Evangelism

Whatever may be the criticisms, the questions, the reservations as to the incidents and accompaniments, the results and fruits, of big evangelistic efforts and movements, what we have to take note of is that, on a scale unparalleled in history, the call to give Christ His place as Saviour is sounding over the world. When we think of the campaigns and the vast radio broadcasting of the Gospel we are not exaggerating when we say that no previous age in the history of Christianity has known anything nearly so immense. But the impressive feature is that which we may call the Sovereign factor in it. God just seems to have decided that, by the simplest possible declaration of salvation in Christ, millions shall daily be placed in a position of being without excuse when the day of judgment comes.

That is the simplest fact. Criticisms of and questions about the instrumentalities and means employed quite apart, it would seem that in His Sovereignty God is determined that men shall know the bare foundation of their salvation. The writer was being given the various criticisms and adverse judgments of a well-known evangelistic campaign in one of America's greatest and worst cities. When the critics had unloaded, he just asked the simple question - "Well, imperfections, weaknesses, and all that apart, is it better for such a city to be made aware of the fact of God than otherwise?" Whereupon the critics just said, "Well, of course, if you just bring it down to that alone, the whole thing would be justified." This is certainly not all that God would have, and it is no argument for the justification of some features, excesses or deficiencies, but, we repeat, may it not be one sign of the end that - on such an immense scale - Christ is being heralded as men's true and only Saviour?

This phase must be viewed in this setting and possible meaning, and not as something in itself. To view it in the former is to give it a meaning beyond itself. To view it as something in itself is to court disappointment, and to take up something that will not bear the weight of God's *full* purpose.

2. Intensifying and Expanding Dissatisfaction with Tradition

This is no view from a cloister window, but the result of world-wide travel and contacts. The positive way of speaking of this discontent is to say that there is a deep and strong reaction toward reality and realism. People of "the old school" are conscious that their traditions are not standing up to new demands and changing conditions. The younger generation is not willing to take these traditions and institutions for granted and as a matter-of-course. Many are standing back and asking questions, not altogether due to lawlessness and a new age, but because of disappointment and a shrewd perception that things are not vital and dynamic in many of the historic and traditional realms.

There was a time when young people recognised, accepted, and were subject to their elders, and took everything from them, just because they *were* their elders. That time has completely passed - especially in the West - and now everything has got to prove itself before it is accepted. So the hoary institutions, the established order, the "as-it-was-in-the-beginning-is-now-and-ever-shall-be" ecclesiastical mentality is just not respected or accepted. Whether this is all a part of, and in keeping with, the general world-movement toward "self-determination", and the revolt against the controls of many centuries - the swing of the pendulum toward a new "liberty" - or whether it lies deeper in the stirrings of spiritual forces toward the ultimate climax, does not alter the fact that it is here and has to be recognised. The inner fact within the general is that there is a new hunger for bread that

satisfies. In a time which has so many appearances of superficiality, cheapness, flimsiness, and frivolity, there is an undercurrent of discontent, and an inarticulate cry for the more substantial. This may be limited to a comparative few, but it is real and by no means insignificant. The booksellers tell us that there is a growing demand for the old spiritual classics, the solid stuff of fifty and more years ago, even for the Puritan writers, and the discerning are reproducing such works.

There is a sense of spiritual loss in those directions where, formerly, there was such a wealth of spiritual measure. We have read the reports of two conferences of leaders of the one body from which more spiritual food has been given to the Church of God than any other in the last century. In these reports there is not only the evidence of tragic loss of measure, but the open confession that it is so. Perhaps we should draw what comfort we can from the fact that there is a consciousness of this loss, but even that is made the more pathetic by the evident absence of any sense of how rightly to recover it. There appears to be no searching for the cause or causes of decline.

However, there undoubtedly *are* reactions, and it is evident that, where solid food is known to be available, many hungry ones are to be found resorting thither. If that end-time sign of "a famine of the hearing of the word" (in spiritual life, power and fulness) is clearly discernible, it is also clear that not a few are aware of the famine and are distressed. This will be a governing factor in God's having a representative company which answers to His fuller thought at the end.

3. The Growing Concern About the Church As Such

In these pages we have recently referred at greater length to this matter, but we are increasingly impressed with the growing and strengthening occupation with it in all directions. It is not only in those quarters from which we expect such reactions, the "evangelical", "conservative", or "fundamentalist", but as a part of a tremendous theological swing-round in "liberal" circles there is an almost astonishing "new look" in this direction. As typical of this, here are some quotations from foremost theologians of our time.

"How stands the Church, regarded as a spiritual organism, as the Body of Christ, in relation to the institutions we call 'churches' today? Which ought the Church to be, primarily? Fellowship or institution? Can there be any doubt where the Pauline stress falls? For him, the Church is pre-eminently a fellowship, not an institution. It is a pure communion of persons united to Christ, its living Head, and to one another through the Holy Spirit: not a highly organised, legally administered institution."

"...if we look at our own 'churches' today, are we never smitten with an awful sense of their unlikeness to the Body of Christ as Paul conceived it?"

"Consider, next, the perennial problem of our Church disunion. 'There is one Body', says Paul. For him, the oneness of the Church is as axiomatic as the uniqueness of the Church's Lord. It is with sheer horror that he hears of 'parties' in Corinth. 'Is Christ divided?' And we cannot doubt that if he were here today, he would condemn our ecclesiastical divisions as roundly as he condemned the cliques in Corinth."

*"We comfort ourselves by saying that, in spite of all our denominations, we have a spiritual union with Christians in other 'churches', and we sing (God forgive us)
We are not divided,
All one Body we."*

"It is in the mission field that the scandal of our divisions presses most heavily. Converts not unnaturally ask, 'Why force your divisions on us?' ...There is no real answer to this question..."

"When we look at our denominations and divisions today, in which one man says, 'I am of Calvin', and another, 'I am of Luther' - can we not hear Paul, across the centuries, indignantly demanding, 'Is Christ in fragments?' Were we baptized into the name of John Calvin? Did we profess our faith in John Wesley? Do we pray to Martin Luther?"

"Surely it is a task laid upon the minds and hearts of all who call themselves Christians, of all who believe the great High Priestly Prayer (John 17) to be a true mirror of the mind of Christ, to work and pray for the healing of the Broken Body of our Lord."

"Or take the question, What is the true mission of the Church in the world? No worthier answer has been given than Paul gave in Ephesians, perhaps the most contemporary book in the New Testament.

"In the forefront he sets the Body of Christ, 'the fulness of him who is being wholly filled'. Christ and His Church, Head and Body, form a corporate Personality, and Christ is 'filled' as the Body grows up into its full spiritual stature. The mission of the Church is to 'gather into one all things' in Christ the cosmic Redeemer."

"Such is Paul's vision, and he speaks with pointed directness to the men of our day, hungry for true fellowship, yet living a 'barbed-wire' existence..."

The above are but selected extracts; they could be extended to many pages.

A part of their significance, we repeat, is that they come from the top ranking theologians of our time, and not from the general level of evangelical leaders. The main import is that they are just fragments of *volumes* being written *in our time* and indicating the new and great concern in this direction.

As we have said elsewhere, it is a tremendous thing to live in a time when there can be so clearly discerned an enforced recognition of God's original and unalterable position that the *Church* is His means, method, object, and answer. That He is compelling to such a recognition is a matter of momentous account, and, at least, indicates that - even if only in a "Remnant" - God will end where He began.

4. Fiery Ordeal and Trial

If we add one further sign of the times, for the moment, it would be that movement over the earth in which Christians are being tested by fiery ordeal and trial. A large part of the world is already undergoing this "baptism", and the waters are moving steadily on over widening areas. They are moving from the Far East toward the Nearer and Middle East and the Near East.

While Christians in parts of the West can still meet in conference and debate the question: "Will the Church go through the tribulation?", many believers are asking - "Can the tribulation be any worse than that through which we are now passing?" For one it is all objective, future, and doctrinal. For the other, real, actual, and ghastly. It would be more healthy and valuable were we to face the matter from another angle and ask - "Have we reason to believe that the Scriptures point to an end-

time in which all artificial supports, 'foreign' aids, external forms, and all that which keeps Christians going from the outside, will be stripped off, and they will stand or fall in so far as they really know the Lord and He is more real than all the accompaniments and *things* of Christianity?" This will be the ultimate criterion, whether in the increasing spiritual pressure upon believers more generally, or by the force of adversity such as that which is now spreading over the world.

God will have reality. For Him His Son is the only reality. He, as such, is the End, the Amen, and God works all His works toward Him, "that in all things he may have the pre-eminence".