

First Love *by T. Austin-Sparks*

Reading: Ezekiel 1; Acts 2:42.

"And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers."

Another way of stating what they did, and perhaps even more exactly a translation of the word, would be, 'and they persisted in the apostle's teaching, and fellowship, in the breaking of bread and the prayers'. I think we might very well gather these fruits of the first movement of the Holy Spirit in this dispensation under the title of first love.

The Lord is calling the church back to its first love, and while there are and may be many commendable things among His people the one thing which to Him is supreme, without which all else fails to satisfy Him, is what He terms, "thy first love" (Rev. 2:4). And it does seem to me that these early chapters of the book of the Acts are, so far as the people concerned are set before us, characterized by a very real zest. There is a zest about things here which I feel needs to be recovered by us. The Lord might say to us, 'I know thy labour, and thy patience', for we are found doing much for the Lord, and we are seeking to hold on and not give up, we are persevering, we are determined, we are very devoted to the truth, we are many things; and the Lord might recognise all these things, but I do feel that there is some room for the Lord to speak of a lack of zest and to say that that mark of first love is something that He would have recovered. It is a better word than enthusiasm.

Now there are many points of correspondence between the first chapter of the book of the prophet Ezekiel and the early chapters of Acts. We have often remarked upon the feature of life in that first chapter, the living ones, and everything in that chapter speaks of life, and life at the flood; there is energy. No one can say that that chapter is marked by passivity, inertia. There is energy, there is action, everything is moving; and there is, in all, this thing that we have called zest. There are four main features, however, or factors which represent a correspondence between Ezekiel 1 and the early chapters of the Acts.

The Man in the throne

The first and supreme factor is that of the man in the throne. That governs and dominates everything, "*Above the firmament there was a throne, and above the throne upon it the likeness as of a man.*" And in the early chapters of the book of the Acts it is the Man in the throne who dominates everything.

A Representative Instrument

Then there is a representative instrument. In Ezekiel it is the four living ones, the cherubim, an instrument of divine purpose, an instrument in union with that throne and the Man upon it, moving as with Him and from Him and for Him. in the book of the Acts the instrument is the church, as there represented; and we have seen that the cherubim are a representation of the church, a representative instrument out of the whole creation.

Divine Counsels

And then, in the third place, there are divine counsels. In Ezekiel they are represented by the wheels, the counsels of God which move, go forward, revolving (we may say) through the ages, out from eternity to eternity, ever going on, counsels which are never

really turned aside, but with persistence indomitable move towards their end. In the book of the Acts we cannot fail to see that it is in relation to the eternal counsels of God that the church in union with the enthroned Lord is moving forward. God is going on. There may be many things which cross the path, which straddle the way, which attempt a hold-up, which set themselves to resist, but in the end the counsel of Gamaliel stands. If this thing be of God then you cannot hinder it, lest you be found to fight against God. The counsels of God stand, and they go on, concerning His Son as in and through and by the church.

The Spirit of the Lord

Then the fourth factor (not the least) is the Spirit of the Lord in all. In the wheels, in the living ones, the Spirit is the motive power, the directing wisdom, the energy. The spirit in the wheels and in the living ones! And, of course, that is unmistakable in the early chapters of Acts, the Spirit of Him who is exalted taking up the eternal counsels and moving in the church to their realisation.

These corresponding elements are quite clear, I think, to us all. That is not just imaginary, not just a beautiful vision, but these are living facts which belong to this dispensation in which we live, not as a dispensation but in this very hour. Jesus is on the throne now. The counsels of God are going forward now. The church to which by His grace we belong is the sphere and vehicle of those counsels, under the government of that throne, and the Spirit of the living God is with us *now*. I think we want to reach out and bring it right here, to get into it in our hearts, in order that there might be some recovery of this zest. I think we hold things far too much as beautiful truths, and when we are put to the test on matters like this they do not help us very much. But we are still in the dispensation of the book of the Acts, the same dispensation, and if things are not now with us as they were then, while there may be many differences between those times and ours, my question is to my heart and to yours as to whether the fault is with the Lord or with us, and whether there is not something to be done on our part by way of recollection. That is only another way of saying recovering first love.

Now you see, in the book of the Acts the factor which produced this wonderful zest, was an inward experience of the exaltation of the Lord Jesus. That is exactly what the coming of the Holy Spirit meant. He came because, and on the ground that, Jesus had taken the throne, and He came to the church — and that means into every one who put faith in the Lord Jesus — in order to make real in every such one the glorious fact that Jesus was Lord, was exalted, was on the throne. That came into them with the Holy Spirit, and that produced in them this wonderful zest.

We all believe that Jesus is on the throne, we all believe that He is exalted, not one of us would hesitate to give that affirmation and emphasis to such words as, "*He being at the right hand of God exalted*". My point is that I feel that in me, and in many of the Lord's people, there is a large amount of room for that to produce something in us that is not there. Jesus exalted! Oh, if we really in heart recognised all that that means, seeing all that He went through, that He encountered, all the mighty resistance which stood in His way, seeing all that had to be overcome of sin, of human weakness and disruption, of satanic force and enmity, of a whole world! When all that, and death itself, with its full force of power — and who shall ever measure or describe these things? — then we see to know that Jesus is exalted, living, at God's right hand, as Lord, means something. If that could really by the Holy Spirit take possession of us inwardly, I am quite sure there would be far more zest than there is, even though we may believe very fervently in the fact that He is on the throne.

The Holy Spirit came and entered into them with all His own divine zest in relation to that faith. There was a great exultation in heaven. When the Lord Jesus returned to heaven

there is a depicting of the scene in the Psalm: "*Lift up your heads, O ye gates; and be ye lifted up, ye everlasting doors: and the King of glory will come in*". Heaven is seen to be exulting. It is a true picture. How in that very exultation of heaven the Spirit of the Lord comes in the triumph, glory, victory, power and joy of Christ being there, and fills the hearts of these believers so that the joy and zest of heaven has an echo in them, and they by an inward experience of the exaltation of the Lord Jesus become characterized by this zest.

Now if we do not feel that we are quite like that, I think the Lord's word to us at this time is just to make us see Him that it shall be so that we will have the zest which is the mark of first love being recovered.

If I said nothing more to you and to myself than just this, you and I need more holy zest and it is something about which we should seek the Lord, that would be a very good exhortation, and that, if we took it to heart, would bring very much glory to the Lord. I wonder if ever you pull yourself up short and look yourself in the face, and talk to yourself like this: Now look here, it is quite true that you have a great devotion to the Lord; it is quite true that you are very concerned for His interests, for His glory, for His people; it is quite true that you are set upon all the fulness of Christ. But is it not also true that you are making a very great strain of all this, and your strain about it all is driving all the joy out of your life, and keeping it out, is making the Christian life a terrible burden, making everybody else feel that it is such? You are under a weight, and very really for you there is not much exultation, not much real zest. There can be deep down joy, you may know something of that deep down, but there is that other element of zest, and that is very largely lacking. Do you ever talk to yourself like that? I confess to you that I have more than once talked to myself like that. Every now and then I have to pull myself up, and sometimes it requires a very deliberate act, taking a position: Look here, I am not going to allow all the joy, all the exultation, all the pleasure of the Christian life to be sapped away even by concern for the Lord's interests! I do believe that the Lord would have His children to be joyful children, outwardly as well as inwardly as far as possible, and perhaps in a much larger way than is the case with many of them. Zest is the mark of first love.

And is not one of the elements of strength in first love trust, confidence — if you like to use the word faith, all right! Faith so often sounds a theological word. Trust, confidence; surely that is a mark of first love. That, in other words, is that you have no questions, you do not stop to wonder if you can trust when first love dominates; you take it for granted unreservedly; you give confidence, otherwise it would not be that kind of love. And may not the lack of this zest of first love be largely due to a weakness in trust? Can the Lord be trusted in such a way as to relieve us of a great deal of the anxiety which drives the zest out of life? Many of our anxieties are concerning things which have never yet happened, and may never happen. I am sure that one of the favourite games of the enemy with the Lord's children is this game of making them to become miserably occupied with things which might happen, and what would happen if such things did happen, how you would behave, how you would react, all that you would have to do. So you are drawn on, and we have been drawn on like that a hundred, perhaps a thousand, times in the course of our lives, and those things have never happened. But what the enemy is after is to strike at trust in the Lord, confidence in the Lord, strike with an "if". If this or that! If such-and-such! and that little "if" becomes in its effect directed against the Lord. If we live like that at all, in any degree, then first love suffers, and the zest goes out. There is this about these believers in the early chapters of the book of the Acts, that they just did trust the Lord, their first love meant trust, and it was practical trust. You do not go and sell all that you have got and give all the proceeds away unless you are trusting the Lord. You do not take that attitude that you call nothing that is yours your own, but everybody else has a right to it, unless you are trusting the Lord, and trusting the Lord concerning others.

And this was not calculated; it was spontaneous, it just happened, it sprang and flew from this inward experience and enjoyment by the Holy Spirit of the fact that Jesus was alive and in possession of everything, on the throne. Real inwardness would mean a lot of difference to us. We can believe in a kind of doctrinal way that Jesus is on the throne, and at the same time believe that we must have been forgotten somehow, everything has gone wrong where we are concerned, although we have trusted the Lord. Do you believe that? Our lives are all a mistake, all a mess, though we have given them to the Lord, trusted them to Him and sought to have no way of our own, willing for anything He wills, having nothing but His interests at heart, and we would affirm that Jesus lives, and Jesus is Lord. Those two things are contradictory. Those two things exclude one another, they cannot go together. There is only one possible answer to that situation, given that there has been no self-willed, self-directed and self-governed attitude, but a complete yieldedness to the Lord and acceptance of His Lordship. However our lives may seem to be a mess, and a failure, and a loss, they are not. He knows what He is doing with us: *"He knows the way that I take"*. The Lord's sovereignty must be applied to the life of every trusting heart; it is not something abstract, and remote, it comes home to everyone. To grasp it would make a lot of difference to all kinds of things which are taking away the zest from life, and seeking to make us other than those who glory in the Lord.

Now we get in verse 42 some of the fruits, the expression of this zest. They are four.

"They continued steadfastly ...", or, they persisted. Now before I say a little word about these four things, let me dwell on that. That conveys one or two things to me. First of all it does convey the impression concerning zest, that they had been gripped, captivated, and now they were giving themselves utterly, persistently and steadfastly. You see, there is the element of thoroughness in this whole business of their relationship to the Lord Jesus: thoroughness, utterness, wholeheartedness, they persisted.

And another thing that conveys to me is this, that they had recognised, or were recognising, that there was an element of challenge, and this matter demanded a wholehearted application. The word is a strong one, 'they persisted.' It seems to say that unless they had persisted there were other things at work which would have interrupted, drawn away. This was not the only thing in God's universe. There were other things against it, and they needed to be persistent and steadfast. This is a mark of first love: the measure of reality of our application to the things of the Lord. It suggests that it is a business; we can make a business of it. It is a call, a demand. That element needs very largely to be recovered, does it not? The giving of ourselves with determination, persistence and wholeheartedness to the things of the Lord needs that. You may have become discouraged, you may have lost heart, you may have felt the intense severity of the way, you may have become worn-out with problems, adversities and discouragements. Nevertheless, He who said to the church at Ephesus, "I have this against thee, that thou hast left thy first love", did not overlook the difficulties, the problems, the discouragements, the long-drawn-out battle. He was not unmindful of that, but, knowing it all, it was not cruel and unkind, unrighteous, unjust, unreasonable of Him to come back to that matter of first love. It is as though He said, Yes, I know all about your difficulties, your heartbreaks, and this disappointment, and these sufferings. I know all about it; nevertheless it is possible in all, through all, after all for this zest of first love to be lost. If we were speaking of human grounds, of course, we would speak with our tongue in our cheek about that matter, we would go steady, but you see it is a matter of the Holy Spirit, is He other than at the beginning? Is He less? Does He get tired? Does He get weary? Do the problems overwhelm Him? I think you see the point. Our need is a larger, fuller, stronger endowment of the Holy Spirit, of the life of the exalted Lord, to carry us right through with unabated zest.

Now just a brief word on these things: "*They persisted in the apostles doctrine ...*". There is a lot in that, but I will sum it up into one word. Of course, you must not think now that that refers to all that we have in the New Testament, for not one New Testament letter was written when this was stated, or when this happened. They had nothing of the fuller doctrine or teaching of the New Testament, and this undoubtedly refers to what the apostles were saying then, and what they had been saying. If you look, you will find that the apostles were preaching on the Old Testament. The apostles' doctrine was the interpretation of the Old Testament in the light of Jesus Christ.

Anybody who says the Old Testament can be put aside and is of no value will have to rule out this first teaching of the apostles. All that Peter said on the day of Pentecost was out of the Old Testament; all that the Lord Jesus said to the apostles after His resurrection was out of the Old Testament, and the apostles doctrine, then, amounted to this, the bringing of the Lord Jesus into view as summing up, and making clear and understood all that the prophets had said of old. They persisted in the apostles' doctrine. What did they do? They gave themselves diligently to this understanding and knowledge of the Lord Jesus as He had been brought before them, interpreted by the Old Testament.

It seems to me that, simply, this is what had happened. Peter and the other apostles had taken up now, with their inward illumination by the Holy Spirit, what the Lord Jesus said after His resurrection, "*Beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he expounded unto them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.*" The apostles had taken that up, and now, with full illumination, had presented the Lord Jesus to them, using the Old Testament Scriptures, and these believers gave themselves to know the Lord Jesus, to follow this thing out, to enrich their hearts with what the Scriptures had to say about the Lord Jesus. It was the Lord Jesus before them. He had captivated them, and now they wanted to know all that they could know about Him, and the apostles had given them the clue. They gave themselves to follow the apostles' teaching.

If you want to see what the apostles' teaching was, take Peter's address on the day of Pentecost alone, and see all the things that He touches upon in that one address. He touches upon the foreknowledge of God; he touches upon the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus according to that foreknowledge of God; he touches upon the resurrection; he touches upon the ascension; he speaks about the Holy Spirit coming, and why, and for what purpose. He speaks about the present authority of the Lord Jesus as a Prince and a Saviour. There is enough there; and then he goes on with repentance, with baptism, with the remission of sins, and then winds up all by this inclusive statement: "*For unto you is the promise, and to your children.*" This is a comprehensive message, covering a lot of ground. And these believers gave themselves to that, to grasp it and to know more of it.

In simple application to ourselves it is this. First love always means an application and devotion from the heart to know more about the One who is the Lover of souls. The overcomer is the one who comes back to first love. Paul, the great overcomer, in Philippians 3 says: "*That I may know him ...*". To know His love more and to know Him more with diligence and application. And they persisted in this matter; there was zest in their quest for knowing Him.

They persisted in the apostles doctrine and they persisted in fellowship: "*They continued steadfastly in fellowship.*" He seems to me that they made a business of fellowship. I only suggest It, that unless we really make a business of it, but it will easily break down. It requires zest, it requires first love. I feel that there is room in me, and may I say there is room in all of us, for something more of this persistence in fellowship, giving ourselves to fellowship. We are too easily put off. Fellowship is interrupted, fellowship is suspended, fellowship is weak, because we take things as we find them; we do not apply ourselves to this matter of fellowship. I suggest, then, that first love is marked by application to

fellowship, zeal for fellowship, persistence in fellowship. The Lord help us in this matter to persist in fellowship. And if there is a rebuff, a set-back, or a difficulty, or a problem here and there, it would be so easy to accept that and let the fellowship decline. May the Lord enable us to say, No! we are steadfast and persistent in the matter of fellowship, He wants it!

"... *In the breaking of bread ...*". That is in their corporate testimony to Christ Himself, what He is, what He has done, and that is in Him their corporate testimony. You see the thing that brings the church together is the breaking of bread, that is the focal point of assembly life. Assembly life is round the Lord's Table, it is the uniting testimony, the Lord's Body, the Lord's Blood. And they persisted in their testimony, to union with Him, and union in Him. They had a new centre of life, and they found their occasion and opportunity there of expressing it, and they persisted. The Lord give us persistence and steadfastness in the corporate testimony to what the Lord Jesus is. If the Lord's Table becomes weak among us, then it is a mark of the decline in first love. When that Table has the place and meaning that it should have, then there will be life, vigour, energy, joy and zest.

"... *And prayers*". This was their new vocation. It seems to me that this was the way in which they first and primarily found expression of their interest and concern for the Lord. What would they pray for? Why should they pray? I am quite sure that if we had listened then we should have heard them pouring out their hearts that that which had become their blessed experience and possession should become the experience and possession of men everywhere, that this thing might get out, that all might know what they had come to know about the Lord Jesus. Oh, they would pray over all that which would work out to the extending knowledge of Him as they did. The point was this: they had got something, and they did not want to keep it to themselves; it was too good, they wanted to get out. You can put that how you like, but that is just what it amounts to. They wanted to get out the knowledge and experience of Him which was theirs. And they prayed and they persisted. If you follow through the prayer life in the book of the Acts you will see that it was all related to the getting out of the testimony, the realisation of the testimony, the enjoyment of the testimony. It came not as their duty, something to be done which was put upon them, that they were called upon to do; it came through first love. We have got something! Oh, that all might know!

May I ask you, is that how you feel about what you have got? I am still waiting for the prayer meeting to prove that. Oh, if we just got back into the book of the Acts again for a little while, our prayer meetings would burst. There would be no delay or silence, but real crying to the Lord: 'Lord, get the knowledge of Thyself out everywhere, as You have given it to us'.

The Lord recover in every one of us first love, that we may get the zest, and make us people like this, who persist in the knowledge of Him, in the fellowship with one another, in the testimony to what He is in a corporate way, and in prayer for all others to know and have what the Lord has given us.