

The Peril of Untried Workers

By T. Austin Sparks

For illustration of the peril of untried workers, we turn to Acts xiii. In this chapter we find ourselves at a point in the journey of Barnabas and Paul which brings out from obscurity a secret flaw in their method. It is in Perga in Pamphylia where one-John (Mark), whom they had taken with them for the work-broke down and returned to Jerusalem.

There are one or two things in the background of this young man's going with them which ought to be investigated: primarily this, that we do not read of the Holy Ghost's saying, "Separate Me Barnabas and Saul ... AND John Mark ... unto the work whereunto I have called them."

The inclusion of Mark was one of a purely personal and arbitrary character. . . and apparently of a very casual order.

John Mark was evidently a young man of some earnestness and apparent promise. He had a Christian home, for it was in the house of his mother that the prayer meeting was held when Peter was in prison. These things evidently led Barnabas to think of him as being promising and, perhaps, a useful addition to the party.

But when all is said, he was an unproved worker, and sooner or later it was inevitable that the weakness should make itself manifest.

Now it is true that every worker has got to be tested somewhere, and many who were no more proved beforehand than was John Mark have gone forth and made good. But here is a case where so much depended upon the worker being men who had been tried, and where it was so very necessary that the Holy Ghost should do the selecting. The issue of this matter was not just that John Mark returned from the battle, but that-in the subsequent refusal of him for a second journey of these two men-confusion and an abiding cause for sorrow and shame arose out of it in the very beginnings of this great epoch.

It is useless to try to settle who was right, Barnabas or Paul. Probably they were both right. Paul was right in not exposing the next journey to the possible further weakness and further breakdown. Barnabas was right in taking the position that because a young man had failed once he should not be deprived of a second chance. But then, the two positions cannot be made one, and so it must be that either a measure of positive right on one side or the other is surrendered, or you must admit that there was a mistake and weakness in the first place.

The sequel to this episode, which is given us by Paul in his letter to Timothy, shows that Paul stuck to his original position. He had taken the attitude that those who took a place in such work as that to which he was called should be proved and known. When, after years, John Mark had proved himself, Paul was quite ready to have him as a fellow-worker and companion; and he instructed that Mark should be brought to him.

It is tremendously important that for the sake of the testimony-the necessity of unbroken fellowship in the case of those whom the Holy Ghost has brought together for a great work-there should not be the jeopardizing element of the unproved and unestablished worker.

The Assembly ought to provide an ample testing ground for all who are to go forth. If the Assembly is constituted and governed by the Holy Spirit, all the weaknesses of its members will come to light. The fact that it is so in many local "families" of the Lord's people is intended to result in moral and spiritual training for the time when the members will have to stand against common foes without the spiritual home-life immediately around or behind.

There are terrible tragedies on the "mission field" in the way of broken relationships which were intended to be very fruitful for the Lord, because the training and proving in a home-fellowship was not adequate. This whole thing is spiritual. It is not just getting on happily with other workers in the more or less comfortable conditions of organized work at home. It is being in a spiritual testimony, against which the devil is positively set. Here are met factors which are not just ordinary social difficulties, however unpleasant. It is the devil out to ruin the testimony by setting the Lord's people at variance, and anyone who has not learned to triumph in the matter at the home end is not safe to be sent forth to the realms where the devil has so much more in every way by which to cause pressure and strain.

Any "training" in a college ought to be but an adjunct to equipment, not THE equipment. The

real training is spiritual, not academic; and this is possible only in a spiritual Assembly.

There will always be a serious loss in any life if it has not had a true Assembly background.

--T. Austin Sparks

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