



The Online Library of T. Austin-Sparks

Published as a PDF by Austin-Sparks.net

Email: info@austin-sparks.net

In keeping with T. Austin-Sparks' wishes that what was freely received should be freely given and not sold for profit, and that his messages be reproduced word for word, we ask if you choose to share these messages with others, to please respect his wishes and offer them freely - free of any changes, free of any charge (except necessary distribution costs) and with this statement included.

Spiritual Punctuation

by T. Austin-Sparks

First published as an editorial in "A Witness and A Testimony" magazine, May-June 1960, Vol. 38-3.

How very few people there are who can cope with punctuation! This act or art of dividing sentences by points seems to trip up most people. Not many can give the inflections, differences, and values which belong to each small note of punctuation. That is, the difference between the comma, the semi-colon, and the colon. How much of our singing and how many of our hymns are spoiled because of a careless ignoring and over-running of these little marks! On the other hand, how a reading or a hymn can be changed from a heap of words into a living message just by a simple and thoughtful observance of these tiny points. Here is a matter in which there can be displayed or betrayed care or carelessness; thought or thoughtlessness; meaning or confusion. Anyone who has once been awakened to this realm of rich values is very sensitive to the violation of even a comma. A little thing like this dot with a small tail can hurt, or give much pleasure.

But, you are saying, what has this to do with the Christian life? Paul would say - "Much, every way"!

Our spiritual life is a book being written. It is a narrative of God's ways with us, and of our history with God. It is a record of what we learn in the school of Christ, and of how we learn it. This narrative of real life can be given a great deal of meaning and be saved from much confusion if we know and observe the laws of spiritual punctuation: that is, where to pause; where to take a breath; where to let down a little, or more, or completely. Unless we do this we shall ourselves become embarrassed, like a singer who has used up all his - or her - breath before the sentence is finished. We shall also be unintelligible to others. Let us illustrate and explain.

The Value of Clarity

What an important thing is clarity, and what a disastrous thing is confusion! Upon the smallest punctuation marks hang these great issues. An excellent example in very common usage is the way in which the metrical version of the twenty third Psalm is sung. (Not written, but sung.) Very rarely is this Psalm sung correctly. Take it in hand with the tune Crimond. The way in which it is commonly sung is not the way of the punctuation. This is the more usual way:

*"The Lord's my Shepherd, I'll not want;
He makes me down to lie;
In pastures green He leadeth me;
The quiet waters by."*

Thus, the lying down is detached from the green pastures, and the quiet waters are something by themselves, unrelated to 'He leadeth me'.

This makes nonsense of the verse: and so also in later verses. Clarity and intelligence are preserved by giving due respect to the punctuation.

So, our first lesson is that a brief pause may save from confusion and embarrassment. We have instances of this in Nehemiah and in the Lord Jesus. Nehemiah was caught in a difficult situation which could have led to serious complications. The monarch, whose cupbearer he was, caught sight of his face when it was sad (a forbidden thing in the king's presence) and challenged him about it. Being given the reason, the king further pressed to know what his cupbearer wanted. This was no small matter, and really carried very far-reaching issues. Nehemiah paused - only for the value of the comma or semi-colon; just to take a breath - in which infinitesimal break his heart went up to Heaven (Neh. 2:4) and, instead of confusion, or even disaster, order and tranquillity resulted. A similar pause for lifting His heart to Heaven occurred in our Lord's life (John 12:28), when things were becoming very difficult. There are not lacking indications that it was a common practice in His life. In neither case was there opportunity for the much prayer and thought that the situation seemed to demand, but, with a background of habitual touch with Heaven, the instant pause, the simple spiritual comma saved from confusion and gave meaning to the movement. We cannot substitute sudden ejaculations for a more solid prayer life, but there is a very great value in the periodic pause in which, amidst the pressure of work, perplexity, sorrow, and care, we take a spiritual breath of Heaven.

We shall, with this lesson, also come to know how very much can hang upon a very little. A comma is not much in itself, but the real value of the whole context may hang upon it. In the comma you need not always raise or drop your voice. It just marks a little break, while you continue on the same level. But when it is a semi-colon or colon, there is a respective relating of pitch and starting again, in a less maintained course.

*"How oft in the conflict, when pressed by the foe,
I have fled to my Refuge and breathed out my woe;
How often, when trials like sea-billows roll,
Have I hidden in Thee, O Thou Rock of my soul."*

May it not be that, not only the private withdrawal for a small space of time, but the prayer or fellowship gathering, is like the rule of the colon, in which there is a sufficient pause and let-down to provide for a fresh start before the present phase is completed?

But what about the full period? How great is the value, the burden, and the responsibility that it carries! How varied and many-sided is the context of this that is represented by a dot! The greatest matters in all the Bible (which is only a representation of all human history) are governed by this 'period'.

"And on the seventh day God finished his work... and he rested on the seventh day" (Gen. 2:2).

Thereupon and thereafter God established in the creation the law and principle over which His most serious jealousy was manifested. It would be a principle by which He would stand with greatest blessing or fiercest judgment. The time came when the whole nation of Israel would go into *seventy years* of exile for violating this principle - ten times seven 'that the land should enjoy its sabbaths'. A whole lifetime, a 'three-score-years-and-ten' of frustration, impotence, unfruitfulness, desolation; the price of violating - not a day but - a principle represented by the day. What was - and is - that principle for which God will exact everything, even a whole life-time and life-work? Hear it reverberating down the ages backward and forward from the Cross - "IT IS FINISHED!"

The desolation, chaos, disruption, darkness, and ruin of an old order has come to a climax in the person of God's Son; its cause has been judged and destroyed: and now the ground is secured for "all things new". The way of 'a new creation in Christ Jesus' is opened. The closed Heaven is cleft. Pentecost is God saying from Heaven - 'It is very good'. "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." God has entered into His rest. The Sabbath of God is more than a day, it is a Person and His finished work. It is not the day as such, but the finished work and new life, that lies behind, and is implicit in, our 'coming together on the first day of the week'; the Table of the Lord being - for many - the first act, showing forth the Lord's death.

How great is this period! No wonder that, even in the type, God showed His supreme concern. It is no less a matter than all that the Cross of Christ means in human history and the creation. The exile of Israel, in Babylon, and now, declares that life has no meaning or value with God when the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ is counted "an unholy thing", and made to mean just the opposite of what God sees in it.

God has written this law, the law of this 'period', deep in human life. Some of us have had to learn deep lessons by painful ways in this matter. We cannot - even in what we call service to God - violate this law of the rest period, without having to pay heavily for it in lost values, maybe lost days or months, vitiated energies, and frustrated labours. It is never lost time to take rest when there is conscientiousness in work. Satan is all against rest. To drive, harrass, and keep too busy is a part of his strategy to mar the new creation life.

God has many points at which He puts a 'period' and says - 'That phase is finished: that chapter is closed.' It is of very great and serious consequence that we be sensitive to His punctuation.

So, meaning, intelligence, value, and effectiveness are bound up with spiritual punctuation, from the comma to the full period; not forgetting the parentheses, the hyphens, the notes of emphasis or interrogation.