

T. Austin-Sparks - a brief introduction

Geir Lie holds a Master of Christian Religion from the Norwegian Lutheran School of Theology in Oslo.



In spite of quite extensive research on both the Holiness Movement and on “Plymouth Brethrenism”, little attention has been dedicated to a study of the possible interrelatedness of the two respective movements. This neglect is significant, considering the fact that J.N. Darby’s pretribulational premillennialism has permeated most segments within the Holiness movement. Darby’s legacy in this regard also applies to his indirect influence on Pentecostal-charismatic eschatology. It is no wonder that several influential devotional writers have been considerably influenced by both confessional traditions. The most well known writer alluded to among these is probably the late Watchman Nee of China, who more or less attempted a synthesis of British Keswick teachings and Plymouth Brethren ecclesiology. While Nee has been the object of a certain academic interest, the same can hardly be said of his friend and (partly) mentor Theodore Austin-Sparks (1888-1971) from the UK.¹ In fact, it was Nee’s spontaneous attendance and participation in the celebration of the Lord’s Supper in Austin-Sparks’ Honor Oak church fellowship in 1933 which a few years later resulted in a formal schism between Nee and the Raven-Taylor fraction of the Exclusive Brethren. Nee had originally been made aware of Austin-Sparks’ literature via China missionary Margaret E. Barber.

Austin-Sparks has been surrounded by a certain mystery within the circles that have valued his teachings. Jim Baxter, until 1996 in charge of Testimony Book Ministry within the US and at the time the one and only distributor of Austin-Sparks’ books, claims that the latter explicitly asked that “there be no biographies

¹ The only critical appraisals I have come across, are A.J. Pollock’s *The Teaching of Mr. Austin Spark’s Book “The Centrality and Universality of the Cross” Examined in the Light of Scripture and An Examination of the teaching of the Honor Oak Fellowship in the Light of Scriptures*, as well as E.J. Poole-Connor’s *The Teaching and Influence of ‘Honor Oak’. A Resumé of Notes originally prepared for presentation in the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches*, 1956.

written about him.”² Neither his many books nor his newsletter *A Witness and A Testimony* convey much autobiographical materials worth mentioning.

Austin-Sparks was born and grew up in the city of London, but took a definite decision for Christ during a visit with relatives in Scotland.³ “His discipleship began when, at seventeen years of age, he walked down a Glasgow street on a Sunday afternoon and stopped to listen to some young people witnessing in the open air,” it was said. That same evening he made the decision that he wanted to be a Christian, and the very next Sunday he found himself “standing with the same eager young Christians in their open-air meeting.”⁴ According to daughter Jean Kinnear, he seems to have been introduced to the later-to-become-famous minister Oswald Chambers as a result of the evangelistic activities in Glasgow into which he immediately immersed himself.⁵ Kinnear characterizes her father as theologically autodidact – he had “no formal theological training or academic qualifications.”⁶

Despite Austin-Sparks’ young age, in 1907 he was listed as a Baptist pastor in Ruabon in northern Wales,⁷ and in Lewisham (London), respectively.⁸ His pastoral career in Wales, however, must have been quite brief, as other documentation demonstrates that Austin-Sparks served the Lewisham Baptist church from 1907 until 1912.⁹ He then received a call from the Raleigh Memorial Congrega-

² Jim Baxter, letter to the author, September 14, 1994.

³ Jean Kinnear, letter to the author, February 15, 1995.

⁴ F(oster), H(arry): “T.A-S. An Appreciation.” *A Witness and A Testimony* (July-August 1971), 69.

⁵ T. Austin-Sparks, “Scotland.” *New Testament Christianity* 16, 3 (July 1906), 58; *ibid.*, “Scotland.” *New Testament Christianity* 16, 7 (Nov. 1906), 138; O. Berry, “Wales.” *New Testament Christianity* 17, 4 (Aug. 1907), 78.

⁶ Jean Kinnear, letter to the author, November 22, 1994.

⁷ “Foreign Missions & Representatives.” *New Testament Christianity* 17, 7 (Nov. 1907), 140.

⁸ T. Austin-Sparks and J.C. Clifford, “Lewisham.” *New Testament Christianity* 17, 7 (Nov. 1907), 137-138.

⁹ W.T. Whitley, *The Baptists of London 1612-1928. Their fellowship, their expansion, with notes on their 850 churches* (London: The Kingsgate Press, [n.d.]), 237.

tional Church in Stoke Newington, London. The “historians” of this latter church have this to say: “He was not a Congregational Minister, but the Church was keen on securing him, and he commenced his Ministry in February, 1912.”¹⁰ According to these same “historians”, Austin-Sparks had initiated yearly conferences “for the deepening of Spiritual life,” obviously inspired by the Keswick conferences and those of Keswick adherent Jessie Penn-Lewis. After his pastorate in Raleigh Memorial was completed in 1921, he took over the Honor Oak Baptist Church (still within the city of London) until 1926 when the church severed its connection to the Baptist denomination.¹¹ Austin-Sparks had previously heard Keswick teacher George Campbell Morgan in Westminster Congregational Chapel in London.¹² Now he was also further introduced to the Baptist minister (and Keswickian) Frederick Brotherton Meyer.¹³

Nonetheless, Austin-Sparks’ greatest theological ineptness was owed to Penn-Lewis.¹⁴ As her co-worker, it was his responsibility to coordinate her conferences from approximately 1923 until 1926,¹⁵ and with failing success he allegedly attempted to convince the elderly lady to open up for interconfessional celebration of the Lord’s Supper as a visible expression of “believers’ oneness in Christ.” According to Jean Kinnear, it was her late father’s ecumenical attitude which was responsible for his and several of his fellow members’ decision to “vacate the Baptist Church and establish the Honor Oak Christian Fellowship and Conference Center in a rented school building” in 1926.¹⁶ Penn-Lewis herself, however, seems to have had slightly less noble thoughts about the Austin-Sparks kind-of-

¹⁰ *Raleigh Memorial Congregational Church. History of Our First Hundred Years 1860-1960*, 8.

¹¹ Whitley, *ibid.*, 239.

¹² For further information on Campbell Morgan, see Harold Murray, *G. Campbell Morgan, Bible Teacher. A Sketch of the Great Expositor and Evangelist* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, [n.d.]).

¹³ T. Austin-Sparks, “Dr. F.B. Meyer and the fuller message of the Cross.” *A Witness and A Testimony*, (Nov. 1932), 157.

¹⁴ T. Austin-Sparks, “A further word.” *A Witness and A Testimony* (Aug. 1927), n.p.

¹⁵ Brynmor Pierce Jones, *An Instrument of Revival. The Complete Life of Evan Roberts 1878-1951* (South Plainfield, NJ: Bridge Publishing Inc., 1995), 204.

¹⁶ Jean Kinnear, letter to the author, November 22, 1994.

ecumenics. After withdrawing from her organization,¹⁷ he initiated his own competing ministry, arranging similar conferences within the same geographical area that Penn-Lewis had ministered (London and the Midlands), and many of the latter's followers flocked to the new competitor. "It has affected us tremendously in attendance, - and in finance!" Penn-Lewis admitted, while nonetheless claiming not to be flabbergasted the least regarding Austin-Sparks' new course of direction: "The Honor Oak matter I can understand, because I have seen Mr. Sparks' character in many ways, and am not surprised." More specifically:

The dear brethren there [at the Honor Oak fellowship] are duplicating everything they found in the "Overcomer". Free paper, motto card, booklets, Conferences, and even the titles for the Conferences! This week it is to be "The Cruciality of the Cross"!¹⁸

It is not difficult to identify with Penn-Lewis' ironic comments concerning Austin-Sparks' "duplicating" her own ministry activities. Her main message had always been Christ's crucifixion and this truth's application to the believer's Christian walk. This emphasis was also illustrated through several of her book titles, such as *Message of the Cross* (1898) and *The Cross of Calvary and its Message* (1903). During her first Swanwick conference in 1920, she again preached on the various aspects of Christ's substitutionary work and on the dogma of justification, on the distinction between "soul and spirit", and on the believer's combat with demonic forces. These messages were published in book-form, first entitled *The Logos of the Cross*, and revised under the title *The Centrality of the Cross*. Both the revised title and other catchwords coined by Penn-Lewis, such as *The Proclamation of the Cross* or similar slogans,¹⁹ contributed to Austin-Sparks' motto regarding *The Cruciality of the Cross*. This hardly could be treated otherwise than as a pitiful and inferior imitation of the message by which Penn-Lewis believed herself entrusted from God to deliver.

Austin-Sparks visited the US for the first time in 1925, and received his first groups of followers in New York City. These groups, however, have always been numerically insignificant. During the 60s, his many books and pamphlets were

¹⁷ Brynmor Pierce Jones, *The Trials and Triumphs of Jessie Penn-Lewis* (North Brunswick, NJ: Bridge-Logos Publishers, 1997), 241, 298-299.

¹⁸ Jessie Penn-Lewis, letter to J.C. Williams, June 26, 1927.

¹⁹ Mary N. Garrard, *Jessie Penn-Lewis: a memoir* (London: The Overcomer Book Room, 1930), 275-276.

distributed by M.O.R.E. (Mail Ordering Religious Education) in Indianapolis, Convocation Literature Sales in Norfolk (Virginia) [which later changed its name to Testimony Book Ministry] and the small church Westmoreland Chapel in Los Angeles. Closely related to M.O.R.E. was Sure Foundation, the publisher of DeVern Fromke's devotional materials, the latter also positively influenced by the teachings of Austin-Sparks.²⁰ Finally John Myers of Northridge (California) has promoted the teachings of Austin-Sparks through his tiny magazine by the title of *Voice in the Wilderness* [later renamed *Recovery*].²¹



²⁰ One of Fromke's books, *The Ultimate Intention*, was translated into Norwegian, entitled *Guds evige hensikt* and published by Logos in Sarons Dal in 1975.

²¹ J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religions*. 3rd. ed. (Detroit, Michigan: Gale Research Inc., 1989), 509-510.