

The Foundation of Spiritual Education

by T. Austin-Sparks

The foundation of spiritual education is to reveal Christ in us and conform us to His image through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: Ezekiel 40:2-4, Matthew 11:29, Mark 3:14, Luke 9:23, John 16:31-32, Romans 8:29, 2 Corinthians 4:6, Galatians 1:16, Ephesians 4:20, Philippians 3:10

Topics: "Spiritual Education", "Learning Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the importance of learning Christ rather than merely imitating Him, highlighting that true spiritual education involves a deep, subjective understanding of Christ's nature and our own limitations. He explains that the Holy Spirit's role is to reveal Christ in us and to conform us to His image, which requires recognizing the vast difference between Christ and ourselves. Sparks challenges the audience to confront their own inadequacies and the impossibility of achieving God's standards through their own efforts, urging them to embrace the transformative process of spiritual education in the School of Christ. He concludes by encouraging believers to yield to the Holy Spirit's work, which prepares them for a deeper manifestation of Christ in their lives.

Transcript

Reading: Eze 40:2-4; 43:10-11; Matt 3:17; 11:25-30; John 1:51; Luke 9:23; Eph 4:20-21.

The basic word out of those read, for our present purpose, is Mat 11:29--"Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me."

Learn of me. The Apostle Paul, in a slightly different form of words, gives us what the Lord Jesus meant--"Ye did not so learn Christ" (Eph 4:20).

Leaving out one very little word makes all the difference and gives the true sense. The Lord Jesus, while He was here, could only put it in an objective way, for the subjective time had not arrived: and so He had to say, 'Learn of me'. When the subjective time came, the Holy Spirit would lead the apostle to leave out the 'of', and say 'learn Christ'.

I am quite sure that many of you will immediately discern that is just the flaw in a very great deal of popular Christianity today--a kind of objective imitation of Jesus which gets nowhere, rather than the subjective learning Jesus which gets everywhere.

So for this little while we are to be occupied with the School of Christ, into which school He brought the twelve, whom He chose "that they might be with him and that he might send them forth" (Mark 3:14). They were first of all called disciples, which simply means they came under discipline. Before ever we can be apostles, that is, sent ones, we have to come under discipline, to be disciples, to be taught ones, and that in an inward way. It is into this school that every one who is born from above is brought, and it is very important that we should know the nature of it, what it is that we are going to learn, and the principles of our spiritual education.

THE OBJECT OF OUR SCHOOLING IS FIRST COMPREHENSIVELY PRESENTED

Coming into this school, the very first thing that the Holy Spirit, the great Teacher and Interpreter, does for us, if we are truly brought under His hand, is to show us in a comprehensive way what it is that we have to learn, to present to us the great object of our education. We read those passages in Ezekiel which I think have a great bearing upon this matter. In a day when the true expression of God's thought in the midst of his people had been lost and God's people were out of immediate touch with Divine thoughts, away in that far country, the Spirit of God laid His hand upon the prophet and took him in the Spirit in the visions of God back to Jerusalem, and set him upon a high mountain, and gave him that presentation of a new temple, forth from which would flow a river of life to the ends of the earth. Then He followed this up by going into the whole thing in the most minute detail, and later instructed the prophet to show the house to the house of Israel with a view to bringing about a recovery of spiritual life in conformity to that great comprehensive and detailed revelation of God's thought, that they should first of all be ashamed.

It is a much disputed matter whether the temple of Ezekiel will yet literally be set up on the earth. We will not argue about that, but of this one thing we need have no question, that all that Ezekiel saw has its spiritual counterpart and fulfillment in the Church which is His Body; spiritually it is all in Christ. And God's method with His people, in order to secure a full expression of His thought, is first of all to present the perfect Object: and this He did when at the Jordan He rent the heavens and said, "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased". He presented and attested that which was the full, comprehensive and detailed expression of His thought for His people. The Apostle Paul, in words familiar to us, expressly voices the fact,

"Whom he foreknew, he also foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom 8:29).

"This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased" --"Conformed to the image of his Son". There is the presentation and the attestation and the declaration of Divine purpose in relation to Him. Therefore I repeat, the Holy Spirit's first object is to acquaint us with what is in view in our spiritual education; namely, that He is to reveal Christ in us and then afterward to get to work to conform us to Christ. To learn Christ we must first see Christ.

THE PRE-EMINENT MARK OF A LIFE GOVERNED BY THE SPIRIT

The mark of a life governed by the Holy Spirit is that such a life is continually and ever more and more occupied with Christ, that Christ is becoming greater and greater as time goes on. The effect of the Holy Spirit's work in us is to bring us to the shore of a mighty ocean which reaches far, far beyond our range, and concerning which we feel--Oh, the depths, the fullness, of Christ! If we live as long as ever man lived, we shall still be only on the fringe of this vast fullness that Christ is.

Now, that at once becomes a challenge to us before we go any further. These are not just words. This is not just rhetoric; this is truth. Let us ask our hearts at once, Is this true in our case? Is this the kind of life that we know? Are we coming to despair on this matter? That is to say, that we are glimpsing so much as signified by Christ that we know we are beaten, that we are out of our depth, and will never range all this. It is beyond us, far beyond us, and yet we are drawn on and ever on. Is that true in your experience? That is the mark of a life governed by the Holy Spirit. Christ becomes greater and greater as we go on. If that is true, well, that is the way of life. If ever you and I should come to a place where we think we know, we have it all, we have attained, and from that point things become static, we may take it that the Holy Spirit has ceased operations and that life has become stultified.

Let us take the example of one who is given to us, I believe, as amongst men, for this very purpose of showing forth God's ways, the Apostle Paul. The words which he uses to define and express what happened to him right at the commencement are these: "It pleased God . . . to reveal his Son in me" (Gal 1:16). Now, that man did a very great deal of teaching and preaching. He put out a great deal. He had a long and very full life, not only in the amount that he put out, but in the concentrated essence which has defeated all the attempts to fathom. At the end of that long life, that full life, that man who said concerning its commencement, "It pleased God . . . to reveal his Son in me", is crying from his heart this cry, "that I may know him" (Phil 3:10); indicating surely that with the great initial revelation and all the subsequent and continual unveilings, even being caught up into the third heaven and shown unspeakable things, with all that, at the end he knows nothing compared with what there is to be known. That I may know Him! That is the essence of a life governed by the Holy Spirit, and it is that which will deliver us from death, from stagnation, from coming to a standstill. It is the work of the Spirit in the School of Christ to present and to keep in view Christ in His greatness. So God, right at the beginning, brings Christ forth, presents Him, attests Him, and in effect says, This is that to which I will conform you, to this image!

Yes, but then, having the presentation, the basic lessons begin. The Holy Spirit is not satisfied with just giving us a great presentation: He is going to begin real work in relation to that presentation, and we are, under His hand, brought to two or three basic things in our spiritual education.

THE CHALLENGE AND MEANING OF AN OPEN HEAVEN

My aim, in co-operation with the Lord, is to make everything pre-eminently practical; and so we apply the challenge immediately, and I ask you, Is the Holy Spirit within you presenting God's fullness in His Son in an ever-growing way? Is that the nature of your spiritual life? If not, then you must have some definite exercise before the Lord about it; there is something wrong. The anointing means that, and if that is not the nature of your spiritual life, there is something wrong in your case in relation to the anointing. To Nathanael the Lord Jesus said, "Henceforth" (our old English word is 'hereafter', but I think many people have mistakenly thought that means the 'after life') "ye shall see the heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man." Hereafter, of course, was the immediate hereafter, the days of the Holy Spirit which were coming so soon. With an open heaven you see, and you see God's meaning concerning His Son.

That open heaven for the Lord Jesus was the anointing. The Spirit descended and lighted upon Him. It was the anointing, and it is the same for us. The open heaven is the anointing of the Spirit from the day of Pentecost onward upon Christ within us. That open heaven means a continually growing revelation of Christ.

Oh, let me urge this. I am brought back to urge this. We must not just add other things too soon, but make sure that we are right on these matters. The open heaven at once brings Gods revelation in Christ to your very door, makes it available to you, so that you are not dependent in the first place upon libraries, books, addresses or anything else. It is there for you. However much the Lord may see good to use these other things for your help and enrichment, you have your own open heaven, your own clear way through, and no closed dome over your head. The Lord Jesus is becoming more and ever more wonderful in your own heart, because "God, that said, Light shall shine out of darkness" hath "shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor 4:6).

THE 'OTHER-NESS' OF CHRIST

That being true--and if it is not, perhaps you must just suspend things there until you have had dealings with the Lord--that being true, the Holy Spirit gets to work on that, as I said, to make two or three other things very real to us, the first of which is the altogether 'other-ness' of Christ. How altogether other He is from ourselves. Taking the disciples who went into His school--it was not the School of the Holy Spirit in the same sense as ours is, but the result of their association with the Lord Jesus during those three or three and a half years was just the same--the first thing they learned was how other He was from themselves. They had to learn it. I do not think it came to them at the first moment. It was as they went on that they found themselves again and again clashing with His thoughts, His mind, His ways. They would urge Him to take a certain course, to do certain things, to go to certain places; they would seek to bring to bear upon Him their own judgments and their own feelings and their own ideas. But He would have none of it. At the marriage feast in Cana of Galilee, His own mother, with an idea, said, They have no wine. His reply was, "Woman, what have I to do with thee? mine hour is not yet come." What have I to do with thee? That is a weak translation. Far better, 'Woman, you and I are thinking in different realms; we have at the moment nothing in common.' Thus throughout their lives they sought to impinge upon Him with their mentality. No, all the time He was putting them back and showing them how different were His thoughts, His ways, His ideas, His judgments; altogether different. In the end I expect they despaired. He might well have despaired of them had He not known that this was exactly what he was doing in them. Catch that and you have got something helpful. 'Lord, why is it that I am always caught out, always making a blunder? Somehow or other, I always say and do the wrong thing, I am always on the wrong side! Somehow I never seem to come right in line with You; I despair of ever being right!' And the Lord says, 'I am teaching you, that is all; deliberately, quite deliberately. That is exactly what I am bringing you to see. Until you learn that lesson, we shall get nowhere at all. When you have thoroughly learned that lesson, then we can begin constructive work, but at present it is necessary for you to come to the place where you recognize I am altogether other than you are. The difference is such that we move in two altogether opposite worlds.'

This ordinary mind of man, at its best, is another mind. This will of man, at its best, is another will. You never do know what lies behind your motives until the Holy Ghost cleaves right down to the depths of your being and shows you. You may put your feelings and desires into the most devout terms. You may, like Peter, react to a Divine suggestion, "If I wash thee not, thou hast no part with me", and say, "Not my feet only, but also my hands and my head"; but it is only self coming up again--my blessing. I want the blessing, and so miss the whole point the Master is trying to teach. 'I am trying to teach you self-emptying.' He might have said, 'and you are laying hold of every suggestion of mine for self-filling, to get; and I am trying to say, Give, let go!' This self comes up in the most spiritual (?) way. Self comes up for spiritual blessing. We do not know what lies behind. We have to come into a very severe school of the Spirit which

eventuates in our coming to discover that our best intentions are defiled, our purest motives are unclean before those eyes; things that we intended to be for God, somewhere at their spring is self. We cannot produce from this nature anything acceptable to God. All that can ever come to God is in Christ alone, not in us. It never will, in this life, be in us as ours. It will always be the difference between Christ and ourselves. Though He be resident within us, He and He only is the object of the Divine good pleasure and satisfaction, and the one basic lesson you and I have to learn in this

life, under the Holy Spirit's tuition and revelation and discipline, is that He is other than we are: and that 'other-ness' is indeed an utter thing. That is one of the hard lessons.

It is certainly one that this world will refuse to learn. It will not have that. That runs directly counter to the whole system of the teaching of humanism--the wonderful thing that man is! Oh no, when you have come to your best, there is a gulf between you and the beginnings of Christ that cannot be bridged. If you attain your best, you have not commenced Christ. That is utter, but we perhaps hardly need that emphasis. Most of us have learned something.

But let us, while we know this in experience, take the comfort which comes perhaps from being told again exactly what is happening. What is the Lord doing, what is the Holy Spirit doing, with us? Well, as a basic thing, He is making us to know that we are one thing and Christ another. That is the most important lesson to learn, for there can be nothing constructive until we have learned it. The first thing, therefore, is the altogether 'other-ness' of Christ as over against ourselves.

THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF REACHING GOD'S STANDARD OURSELVES

Then, secondly, the Holy Spirit brings us face to face with the utter impossibility of our ever being that of ourselves. You see, God has set up a standard, God has presented His model, God has given us His object for our conformity and the next thing we come up against is the utter impossibility of being that. Yes, of ourselves it cannot be. Have you not learned that lesson of despair yet? Is it necessary for the Holy Spirit to make you despair again? Why not have one good despair and get it all over? Why despair every few days? Only because you are still hunting round for something somewhere, some rag of goodness in yourself that you can present to God that will please Him, satisfy Him and answer to His requirements. You will never find it. Settle it that "all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags". Our righteousness, all that trying to be so righteous, the Lord says of it all, "Filthy rags!" Let us settle this once for all. If you are looking ahead of what I am saying, you will see what it is leading to. It is leading to the most glorious position. It is leading to that glorious issue mentioned by the Lord Jesus in this way, in those days before things became inward: "Learn of me . . . and ye shall find rest unto your souls." That is the end. But we shall never find rest unto our souls until we have first of all learned the utter difference between Christ and ourselves, and then the utter impossibility of our ever being like Him by anything that we can find in ourselves, produce or do. It is not in us, in ourselves, in that way. So we had better despair our last despair with regard to ourselves. Those two things are basic.

A FINAL WORD AND EXHORTATION

But then the next thing the Holy Spirit will do will be to begin to show us how it is accomplished. We are not going to start on that just now, but stay with the fact that the Holy Spirit can do nothing until these other things are settled. Oh, God is very jealous for His Son. His Son has gone right through the fires over this matter, having accepted manform and a life of dependence, having voluntarily emptied Himself of that which meant that at any moment He could of Himself work by Deity for His own deliverance, salvation,

provision, preservation; having emptied Himself of that right and said, I let go all My rights and prerogatives and powers of Deity for the time being and I accept man's position of utter dependence upon God as My Father; I meet all that man ever has to meet on man's level! * He met it in every realm in its concentrated form and force and went through without a flaw as man for man, and went back to the throne on the merit of a complete triumph over every force that ever man has to encounter in satisfying God. Do you think that after that God is ever going to forgo His Son, and all that He wrought in man's behalf, and say, Only be at your best and that will satisfy Me? Oh, what blindness to Christ, to God, is this Christianity that is popular today! No, there is only One in this universe concerning whom God can say from His heart "in whom I am well pleased", and that is the Lord Jesus Christ. If ever you and I are going to come into that favour, it will be as "in Christ Jesus", never in ourselves.

When that is learned, or when that part of the education has been taken up, then it is that the Holy Spirit can begin the work of conformity to the image of God's Son. Well, we have seen lessons one and two in the case of the disciples. Through the months and years, they came to see how altogether different He was from themselves, and then came to the place of despair on that very matter as the Lord intended it should be. He foresaw it all. He could not hinder it, He could not save them, He had to allow them to go that way; and right at the end when they were making their loudest protestations about their loyalty, their faithfulness, their endurance, and what they were going to do when put to the test, He said to them all, "Do ye now believe? Behold, the hour cometh, yea, is come, that ye shall be scattered, every man to his own, and shall leave me alone" (John 16:31-32). And to one in particular He said, "The cock shall not crow till thou hast denied me thrice" (John 13:38). What do you think those men felt when He was crucified, and they had all run away, and left Him alone, and the one had denied Him? Do you not think dark despair entered into their souls, not only over their lost prospects and expectations, but despair over themselves. Yes, and He had to allow it. He could take no step to prevent it; it was necessary. And you and I will go the same way if we are in the same school. It is essential. No constructive work can be done until that has got advanced within us.

Well, that sounds terrible, but that ought to be encouraging! After all, it is all constructive in a way. What is the Lord doing with me? He is preparing a way for His Son, He is clearing the ground for bringing in the fullness of Christ. That is what He is doing. He did it with them, and Pentecost and afterward was His answer to what happened on the day when He was delivered up, to all that happened with them. You say, Then He commenced His constructive work. Yes, He did; after the Cross and Pentecost, things began to change in an inward way, and from that time you begin to see that Christ is now manifested in a growing way in these men. They may have a long way to go, but you cannot fail to see that the foundation is laid, the commencement has been made. There is a difference, and the difference is not that they are necessarily changed men so much, as that Christ is now within them transcending what they are by nature. It is not that they become so much better, but it is that Christ within becomes so much more real as a power.

That is all for the moment. Let us bow our hearts today, yield today. It is the School of Christ. I know how challenging it is, challenging to this old man who dies very hard, yields with great difficulty. All our training, teaching, perhaps has been other than this. We have come into this horrible heritage of humanism--to be the best that I can be, to be my best! Well, you must take what I am saying in the sense in which I am saying it. No one is going to think that you can go and just be careless, slovenly, at your worst or less than your best, simply because of what I have said; but you know what I am talking about. At our best we can never pass across that gap between man and Jesus Christ. No, that gap remains, and the only way to get

over is to die and to be raised from the dead; but that, for the moment, is another matter.

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