

# The Spiritual Basis of the Christian Life

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The sermon emphasizes the necessity of returning to the spiritual foundations of the Christian life, highlighting the role of the Holy Spirit in spiritual rebirth and understanding.*

**Scripture:** John 1:13, John 3:6-8, Acts 2:41, Romans 8:9, 1 Corinthians 2:14, Galatians 5:25, 1 Timothy 1:18, 1 Timothy 6:20, 2 Timothy 1:6, 2 Timothy 2:2

**Topics:** "The Role of the Holy Spirit", "Spiritual Foundation"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the critical need for Christians to recognize the spiritual foundation of their faith, warning against the tendency to slip into a mere formalism that lacks true spiritual vitality. He highlights Paul's letters to Timothy as a call to remember the original anointing and the essential role of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life. Sparks urges believers to understand the distinction between the natural and the spiritual, asserting that true spirituality is a fundamental change in one's being, enabled by the Holy Spirit. He points to the Gospel of John as a reminder of the necessity of being born of the Spirit to grasp the deeper truths of Christianity. Ultimately, he calls for a return to the sovereignty of the Spirit in the life of the Church, emphasizing that all growth and understanding must come from the Holy Spirit's work within us.

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## Transcript

We today, as Christians, live in the full development of that which Paul feared. It is very largely - though, thank God, not wholly - present in Christianity today. But it is very necessary to recognise that this is always a persistent tendency in all Christian life. You and I can fall into this peril as easily as anyone else: indeed, to avoid it constitutes the greatest difficulty that any Christian has, and certainly that any body of Christians has - to avoid decline into a merely formal system, merely outward order, into something organized and institutional. All unconsciously, often imperceptibly, we move away from the essential spiritual nature of our life. I think you will recognise that this is a warning that has a place today, as protective and as recovering.

Let us now, through these letters to Timothy, widen our horizon a little, and be led out into the larger realm of this matter. We shall find ourselves moving in a very large sphere in this particular connection. These letters will lead us there quite naturally. We take up again the retrospective feature in these letters, looking back to the beginnings, to the foundations, to the essentials. In our last chapter we were occupied with the look back to Jesus: "Remember Jesus Christ". Now we are going to look back to the real basis of the

Christian life, as Jesus showed it; but let us go through Timothy.

## Back To The Beginnings

As we look into these letters, we find Paul reminding Timothy - yes, reminding him very forcefully - of certain things which lay right at the very root of his own life and of his service to the Lord. We have fragments like this: 1 Timothy 1:18: "according to the prophecies which went before on thee" - literally, 'the prophecies which led the way to thee'; in modern language, 'in accordance with the prophetic intimations concerning you'. If you look at the context, you will see that the time referred to was when Timothy was coming under the anointing for service, for ministry, for his active part in the Gospel. The Apostle is calling to remembrance the great principle, the great truth and foundation, of his life and work. Further, 1 Timothy 6:20: "O Timothy, guard the deposit". 2 Timothy 1:6: "Keep constantly blazing the gift of God which is in you..."; again it is dated back, as you see, to a particular time. 2 Timothy 2:2: "The things which thou hast heard from me..."; 3:14: "Abide thou in the things which thou hast learned..." You see all this takes Timothy back. Paul is calling up the past, calling up the foundations, calling up what has been. He is, in effect, saying: 'Now, Timothy, this has got to be reinforced, this has got to be consolidated, this has got to be confirmed, in the face of the present tendencies and perils, the present course of things. All this has got to be brought up in a new way, and re-established. We are going round a bend in the road, and that is always a dangerous place and time, and we need on such an occasion to be reinforced with what has been of God in the past.'

Now, I am not going to dwell upon these passages. I am simply taking up this factor of retrospect and résumé, which means confirming that which has been, with the future, this perilous future, in view. What does it all amount to? If you look again more closely, you will find that it all relates to the Holy Spirit. All this means, in effect, that everything at the beginning came by the Spirit; that everything, to use the other word, is by the anointing. 'Timothy, you stand where you are because of that original anointing, because at the beginning the Holy Spirit did something in you and with you. Timothy, your ministry and service so far have been because of the Holy Spirit. Now the threat and the tendency at this time is to depart from that basis, and for another basis of things to come in which is not essentially spiritual - it is something else.' It is very important that we should recognize that. I may say, in parenthesis, that never before in my own life have I seen such a contrast amongst Christians, and in Christianity, as there is today, and it is really the cause and root of all the trouble. It is a difference, not between the Christian and the world, but within Christianity itself, between what is spiritual and what is natural. And it is that that we must look at.

## The Gospel Of Spirituality

Now, in order to be helped, we must take our retrospect much further back. We must go right back to John's Gospel. I said earlier that Timothy naturally leads us into a wider realm: and yet Timothy does not lead us back only. You know that John's Gospel was written long after Paul's two letters to Timothy. Although Paul's second letter to Timothy was the last thing that he ever wrote, it was years afterwards that John wrote his Gospel, his Letters and the Revelation. So that Timothy leads us right into the full development of this other thing. I wonder if you have ever really grasped this. We take up our New Testament in the familiar arrangement as we have it, and we say, 'Well, of course, the first things in the New Testament are the four Gospels - Matthew, Mark, Luke and John: that is the beginning of the New Testament'; but have you recognized that at least the fourth of those was written long after everything else in the New Testament? If you were compiling the New Testament chronologically, you would have to put John's Gospel right over near the end.

Now do you see what that implies? Why did John write his Gospel, his Letters, and the Revelation, as the last writings of the New Testament age, the apostolic age? The Gospel of John was written when this other kind of Christianity had become almost full-grown - this other kind of Christianity that is not spiritual, but natural. You have got to read John's Gospel in the light of the situation existing in the Church when it was written, otherwise you cannot really get its message, its values. It is a great call-back to spirituality. This Gospel of John is, as we know, the spiritual Gospel. It is not just the earthly life of Jesus: everything here is of spiritual, heavenly and eternal significance, not of earth and time at all.

You notice how it begins. Take the third chapter. The third chapter of John was written when the Church had left its first love, when the Church had left its first position; when Christianity had taken on an altogether different complexion from what it had at the beginning. This chapter is the enunciation of a fundamental principle of the Christian life which needs to be recovered. We know this chapter - or we think we do. Of course, we know the words. Perhaps we are almost wearied with that name, Nicodemus. And yet - I do not exaggerate; please believe me - I speak the truth when I say that I come back to that Gospel of John, after having known it, and read it, and studied it, and spoken on it, for many, many years, and feel that we really have not grasped this - the Church has not grasped what is here. It would be impossible for the present situation amongst Christians and in Christianity in general to exist, if what is in the third chapter of John really obtained! I am not exaggerating; I cannot be too strong about this.

And so, at the risk of touching on things which you think you know, let us look again at these words. We will not read the whole chapter, but consider the following passages. "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Marvel not that I said unto thee, ye must be born anew." (The margin says 'from above'.) "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the voice thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh, and whither it goeth...." ('This thing is a mystery to you, you don't know...'): "so is every one that is born of the Spirit."

#### A New Entity

First of all, you have an entity: "That which is born of the flesh." That is an entity. That is not difficult to understand on the natural side. Every little new-born baby is an entity of the flesh: it is something quite concrete, something quite definite, and you do not find two in every respect alike. So far as the flesh is concerned, and the natural, that which is born is a definite, concrete entity - we know that. And, in just the same way, "that which is born of the Spirit" is a distinct, definite, concrete entity, altogether different, but absolutely real. That entity, born of the Spirit, is something quite definite and altogether distinct from that which is born of the flesh. With the new birth of every child of God, a spiritual entity has been brought into being, different entirely from the entity and the constitution of the natural, but just as real, just as definite.

I repeat: very, very few Christians seem to understand or know this. We have 'joined' something, we have 'joined Christianity', we have 'gone into the Christian religion' - put it how you will. It is something objective; we have come over into some other sphere of interests and activity and life and conduct. That is the idea about Christianity. The Lord Jesus here is saying - what the New Testament confirms through and through - that this is an altogether different thing; this is not one bit of the order of the natural, this is spiritual; the natural and the spiritual belong to two different orders and kingdoms. That is the context of these words. And therefore every born-again child of God is, in the innermost truth of their being, a different entity. It is not that they have 'taken on' something, or 'gone into' something. I have often used the word 'species' - they are a different kind of person in their very being, with another constitution, something constituted by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, all from above.

People are talking nowadays about visiting the moon. At the end of the century men will perhaps have landed on the moon - but not with their bare earthly constitution! No man, just as he is, will ever do that. He will have to have an apparatus which constitutes him, in effect, a different kind of person, in order to live out there. To go into that realm as he is would be disaster, destruction. And you and I will never be able to go to Heaven without a new constitution - and not an artificial one either! No make-up about this! It has got to be constitutional. There is a clear gulf, broad and unbridgeable, between what we are naturally and what we are as children of God.

If you really are a child of God, if you have come to the Lord, if you have really had the experience of salvation, you know that something has happened to you. This is explaining what has happened. And the Holy Spirit says, 'Look here, things have got off that basis.' We have got to get back there. We have got to recognize again this broad line of difference and division between what is natural and what is spiritual in Christianity. There are few things more important than that we as Christians should be able to recognize the fundamental difference between what is natural and what is spiritual. We have a new constitution, a different constitution, by the Holy Spirit.

### Natural Versus Spiritual

The natural man is always trying to get things on to a natural basis. He must bring everything on to the basis of natural reason. He must be able to reason the thing through, to comprehend, to compass the thing with his reason. A very great deal of Christianity is just man taking hold of the Bible, of Christian truth, Christian doctrine, Christian things, and interpreting and applying by natural reason. And the Word of God is as distinct as anything can be: the door is closed to that, the door is CLOSED. GOD has closed the door. You are not going to get anything through by the power of your reason, however big it is - not a bit!

Look at our friend, Nicodemus. He stands for all time as an example. "How can a man...? How can these things be?" A good man, a clever man, an intellectual man, a religious man, but outside the door. The door is absolutely closed. Now, you can apply that everywhere. Man may be most devout, most devoted, most religious; he may be a red-hot fundamentalist, a champion of Christian doctrine; and yet it may all be in the realm of his own intellectual power and grip. There is a world that is closed to him, of which he knows little or nothing. He has 'heard the voice', but he 'knows not'. He has heard the sound, and taken the sound as the sum: but there is a mystery that is still outside of his kingdom; and the result of this is that there may be good, yes, devoted, earnest, sincere people, who, living in that realm in Christian things, cannot understand spiritual people, cannot understand the things of the Spirit at all. Spiritual things will always be a mystery, an enigma, to the natural mind.

"Remember Jesus Christ". The difference between Jesus and the Jewish leaders, in their radical and almost fanatical devotion to religion, was not a difference of religion at all. It was not that He was more religious than they. It was the difference between the spiritual and the natural in religion. To them He was an enigma, He was a mystery - and, of course, He was all wrong. He could not be right, for, you see, natural reasoning says this and that; but how off the mark they were. Now do you get the point? It is an exceedingly important one. A real walk with God in the Spirit, while, of course, never contradicting Scripture, but always being consistent with the Word of God, is very often a lonely thing amongst Christians. The tragedy is that it should be so, but it is very often like that. What then is spirituality? It is first of all a fundamental change in the being, in the entity, in the person: that is spirituality. After that, it has many outworkings.

## The Sovereignty Of The Spirit

"The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the voice thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh, and whither it goeth: so is every one that is born of the Spirit." A sovereign act of the Spirit. That takes us back to this other fragment: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh", and to that earlier fragment in this Gospel by John, which makes it so clear, so emphatic: "...which were born, not of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (1:13). This is something in the sovereign hands of the Holy Spirit and taken right out of the hands of men. You cannot convert yourself, you cannot convert anyone else; you cannot make yourself into this other creature, this new creation, and you can never make anyone else it. And you can never say when it is to be, either for yourself, or for anyone else. All that is a matter of the sovereign Spirit. If the wind decides to blow, it does not give you notice a day beforehand! It just blows, and when it blows you cannot say, 'You are out-of-date, you have come at the wrong time - this is not a convenient moment!' It blows, and that is all there is to it.

Now here you are touching a principle: the sovereignty of the Spirit, as represented by the sovereignty of the wind. You know quite well that [it] is useless to stand up against the wind when it really decides to blow. Carry that principle over further into the New Testament, and you will read three times: "And the Lord added to the church those that were being saved...", "there were added unto them...", "there were added to the Lord..." Who added? Did the apostles add? Not at all. The Lord added. There is all the difference between our being told to go and join a church, and the Lord adding to Christ, or between our joining what we call a church, and being added to Christ. We cannot join Christ at our own will, just when we want to, or think we will decide to, because being added to Christ involves being re-constituted on a different principle, and that is not in our power at all. It is the Lord Who must do it, so that the adding is His sovereign act: and when He decides to do it, it is wonderful, is it not? And if He does not decide to do it, you can work yourself to death, and nothing will happen. This is the work of the Lord.

Look at the day of Pentecost. The wind blew then - a mighty rushing wind. Was it sovereignty? "And there were added unto them in that day about three thousand souls." This was the sovereignty of the Spirit. How wide and far-reaching is the application of that! Oh, that Christianity were on that fundamental basis today - the absolute sovereignty of the Holy Spirit! Why is it not so? Because of the present sovereignty of the natural, because of the intrusion into Christianity of the natural man.

### A New Faculty

Read again John chapter three. As we have seen, we have here a new constitution, a new entity - "that which is born of the Spirit". Here, too, we have the sovereignty of the Spirit: He blows where He will, and there is always a mystery, a glorious mystery, about Him and His work. But notice, further, that it is a matter of capacity. To Nicodemus, the Lord says: "Art thou the teacher of Israel, and understandest not these things? ...We speak that we do know... If I told you earthly things, and ye believe not..." "Why, if you cannot understand the secret of the wind - and that is a natural phenomenon, that is an earthly thing that belongs to your world of reason - if you cannot cope with that, what will it be when I tell you heavenly things?" "We speak that we do know".

Do you see the point? Here is a difference of capacity, a new and a different faculty of knowledge, of apprehension and comprehension and understanding. It is a spiritual faculty, for spiritual things. I know how familiar this is to many: it is not new; but there is an urgent need that we should bring this again to the whole realm of our Christianity. I am sure that it has not yet been grasped by many Christians, even of

long standing in the Christian life, that, by their very constitution as children of God, they are supposed to have a faculty which makes them capable of comprehending and understanding spiritual things that no natural mind can understand. The youngest child of God is supposed to have this faculty. It may not be fully developed, but it is a constituent of their very being. Have you grasped that? And the very presence of that faculty is the basis upon which everything in the Christian life is going to be built. The Holy Spirit only builds upon HIS OWN foundations, upon what HE HIMSELF puts down as a basis. And that basis is a spiritual one: that which is of the Spirit is spiritual. All our growth, therefore, is going to be along the line of spiritual understanding, spiritual knowledge: not the accumulation of a vast amount of truth, or of religious, Christian information, but what the Spirit teaches us. It will be THROUGH THE WORD, but only WHAT THE SPIRIT TEACHES, for He has come for that very purpose.

Now, there must be a link between us and the Holy Spirit, which is in correspondence with Himself, and the link between the Holy Spirit and the born-again child of God is the renewed spirit of the child of God, with this new capacity, so that the child of God, over against the whole world of merely intellectual knowledge, is able to say: 'We know' - "we speak that we do know". It may be very little, but you know, you know now. As far as you have gone, it is a knowledge which is yours, which is new and altogether different. You are able to say: 'I don't know very much, but what I do know, I know; and the way in which I have come to know it is not because it has been presented to me, but because it has happened in me. Something has been done inside; and, although I cannot put it into words or theories, or compose it into a set of ideas, I know - I KNOW!' "We speak that we do know". There is something about spiritual knowledge which is so strong, so settled, so satisfying, so rest-giving. It is a new capacity. What is the difference? "If I have told you earthly things..." That is one realm: what about the heavenly things? 'Now, Nicodemus, with all your wonderful outfit of birth, upbringing, training, education, you are still in the realm of earthly things, and even there they are beyond you. You have not yet come into the realm of heavenly things.' Therefore, "Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born from above."

That is a very, very great need in safeguarding the whole Christian situation and in the recovery of spiritual effectiveness in this world: a fresh discernment of the fundamental difference between the natural and the spiritual - yes, even in Christian things. No one thinks that I am speaking about something that is extra to what is in the Word of God. I am speaking about the necessary faculty given by the Holy Spirit, and the necessary work of the Holy Spirit, in order that we should rightly know the mind of the Spirit in the Word of God. If we get on to any other basis than that, all sorts of things will happen, which will be very sad and very distressing and very wrong. The Holy Spirit said through Paul to Timothy: "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God..." Paul is saying, in effect, 'Look here, we must get back to what the Holy Spirit has given, what has come from the Holy Spirit, and what, therefore, is spiritual. We must get back to what God MEANS.'

John 3 is a tremendous offset, not only to the world of the unconverted and un-born-again, but to a great amount of Christianity as we know it, which is clearly not the Christianity of a different entity, of a different constitution, of a different capacity. Let us be sure that with us it is the right thing, and not the false and the imitation.

### The Significance Of Pentecost

Let me close with a word of warning. This is not necessarily a special revelation that is given to any particular persons. Be very careful there. It may sound a fine point, but it is a very important one. It does not mean that, because we are so reconstituted and have this other faculty, we get a special revelation.

No, it is not a special revelation, but it is a special faculty for knowing what has been revealed.

This is the inclusive and comprehensive meaning of the advent of the Holy Spirit. What took place on the day of Pentecost corresponded, in the history of the Church, to what took place in the personal life of the Lord Jesus at the Jordan. At the Jordan He was baptized, signifying that He was buried, that something was put out of sight. In type, in figure, the natural man goes out of view. He rises in type another man. And then what? Heaven opens, the Spirit descends, and from that point everything is by the Spirit. "Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness..." And then to Nazareth: "And He opened the roll, and found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me..." Everything is by the Spirit.

Again, let us be understood correctly. We have not said that in the baptism of Jesus an "old man" literally was buried as in the case of all other believers, but that - sin apart - He was taking representatively the ground that we all have to take in one particular respect, that is that nothing shall be in life that is not of the Father by the Holy Spirit. In Him it was wholly true, but in us it is a position to be taken and then made real as we seek to walk in the Spirit.

And so we come to Pentecost. Has the Church in its representation or nucleus been baptized into His death? Well, look at them! Before they are re-established on resurrection ground, they are baptized into His death right enough. They have come to an end of all natural resources, either for understanding anything, for seeing through anything, or for being able to do anything. They are as good as dead and buried - no prospect, no future. "We hoped..." - we HOPED, in the past tense - "that it was He which should redeem Israel", and that hope has now gone, there is nothing. Yes, they were indeed baptized into His death. But now, on the day of Pentecost, what do we find? They are raised as a vessel, and the Heaven is opened, and the Spirit comes and fills it, and from that time everything is by the Spirit. They had a new knowledge - and how their knowledge grew, even in the Word of God! The Word of God, which was for them the Old Testament, had been so largely a closed book, spiritually. They had only got it in the letter, and they were all wrong in their interpretation of it, as it came to be proved. Now the Bible is new for them, because they are on new ground; potentially in the new day of the Spirit.

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