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The Work of the Holy Spirit

by T. Austin-Sparks

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I have had a sense for some time of a growing burden and constraint to a reconsideration or re-emphasis upon the work of the Holy Spirit. The Lord would have us now take but a small fragment of that whole matter, and I ask you to turn for our clause to 1 Cor. 2:14, and a part of the first sentence in that verse which is this: "the things of the Spirit of God", "the things of the Spirit".

The Dispensation of the Holy Spirit

It is common knowledge that God has arranged the course of this world's history in what we call ages or dispensations, which simply means that at given and different times a certain character is given to that period. There are the past dispensations which had their own character and nature and regime. There will be future dispensations called in the New Testament "*the ages of the ages*". They again will have their own particular characteristics. We are in one of these arrangements of God, and it is common knowledge that God has so arranged the course of this world's history. It is also common knowledge that the advent of the Holy Spirit on that particular occasion which has come to be known as the day of Pentecost marked a change in the nature of the ages. That day saw a change of dispensations. That day brought in the dispensation in which we still live which has its own particular and peculiar characteristic different from all the others. This, of course, is a commonly accepted truth, but the failure to recognise adequately the nature of the change which took place on that day has resulted in nine-tenths of all that which does not bring honour to the Lord Jesus, or really to Christianity. There is a great deal that does not honour the Lord Jesus in the present state of Christianity as we know it. There is that which almost everyone deplores regarding this condition. I

mean there are very few people who do not deplore the divisions among Christians and many other things like that, and these have brought about a state which really does not glorify our Lord, and makes room for much that He would not have and would not be if He had things according to His own mind.

The Holy Spirit's Work in This Age

Now there are four great connections of the Holy Spirit in this age. They are these -

(a) The Relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Man in Heaven

Firstly, the Holy Spirit is related to the perfected Man in heaven as His, the Holy Spirit's, vision, objective and passion. In other words, the Holy Spirit has come as committed to that One at God's right hand, the perfected Man, to work everything in this earth in relation to Him. He is the sole and inclusive objective of the Holy Spirit's work in this dispensation. And the Holy Spirit's passion is Jesus Christ in heaven as God's model for a new creation. That is the first thing.

(b) An Alteration in Man's Being

The second great thing with which the Holy Spirit is connected in this age is the alteration in man's very being, to make a fundamental difference in the very being of man, basically and progressively, and that is a great thing.

(c) Calling out a People into Life-Union with Christ

The third thing is the calling out from the nations of a people into life-union with Christ by which the church which is His Body, is formed. That is the commitment made by the Holy Spirit to the Lord Jesus Himself, to get His Body for Him, to make that Body suitable to Him, and to take that Body back to Him. All the energies of the Holy Spirit are church-ward, related to the building of the Body of Christ by gathering and building up. That is simply the fulfilment of the Lord's own words: "*I will build my church*" (Matt. 16:18). Seeing that so soon after He said those words, He went back to glory without doing anything, or very little, about it, it is evident that it was handed over to the Holy Spirit to fulfil the thing that He had said He would do.

(d) The Commissioning and Empowering of the Church for World Ministry

And fourthly, the Holy Spirit has as His work the commissioning and empowering of the church for a world mission and ministry, to anoint the church. And I underline *the church*. It is very important to underline that because that takes us back to what we said at the beginning, an inadequate apprehension of the meaning of the coming of the Holy Spirit has led to many weaknesses and defectivenesses. It is the church that is the anointed vessel for a world commission and ministry. That has been missed. If only the church as a whole had stood into the anointing and the commission, we should have seen a continuance of what was at the beginning, but that has been largely lost, although there is a coming back to that now.

Now, within those four things, as you will realise, a whole lot of other things will be found.

The Bringing About of a Vital Union with God and Man

We pass to the second, the alteration in man's being as the work to which the Holy Spirit has committed Himself, and for which He has come, and the first aspect of that great change by the work and power of the Holy Spirit is to bring about a vital union between man and God, a vital union between man and God in Jesus Christ; aliveness to God in a very immediate, real, conscious way, something altogether new as to man's consciousness of God, an aliveness to God and God's aliveness to man. That is the first phase and stage of this work of the Holy Spirit with regard to man's very being.

By New Birth

This involves what the New Testament speaks of as new birth, being born anew. This is the rebirth of a certain faculty by which man is able to have this aliveness to God. The Word of God has this phrase: "*The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord*" (Prov. 20:27). Now, a lamp is a very definite and concrete object. A lamp is something in itself. It is not just something abstract. A lamp is a definite object. The lamp of the Lord is the spirit of man. When Adam was disobedient, that lamp went out. The spirit of man was no longer the lamp of the Lord in that man. The lamp went out, the light went out. And so right through the Bible it is assumed and declared that man by nature is in darkness, man by nature is blind, man by nature is without understanding, man by nature does not have the knowledge which is life. The Lord Jesus built His whole coming and ministry upon that fact. "*I am come a light into the world*" (John 12:46). "*(I came) into this world, that they that see not may see*" (John 9:39). "*This is life eternal, that they should know thee the only true God, and him whom thou didst send, even Jesus Christ*" (John 17:3). To know, to know. It is assumed and taken for granted that man is in the dark, blind, without knowledge, and without understanding.

Now, the great passage which gathers all that into itself is the whole of that verse from which we took the part, 1 Cor. 2:14: "*Now the natural man receives not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him; and he cannot know them, because they are spiritually judged. But he that is spiritual judges all things*". What have we got here? We ought to read the whole chapter, and I suggest to you that you do read this chapter again very carefully as soon as possible. In verse 10 we have this phrase: "*For the Spirit searches all things, yea, the deep things of God.*" Now that is said in connection with what has just gone before. "*Things which eye saw not, and ear heard not, and which entered not into the heart of man*" - strong words - "*whatsoever things God prepared for them that love Him. But unto us God revealed them through the Spirit: for the Spirit searches all things, yea, the deep things of God.*" Those deep things of God are things which "no eye has seen, no ear has heard, things whereof no vision ever dawned on human heart, all those things which God has made ready for those who love Him". That is how Way [Arthur S. Way] translates that verse very beautifully. And the covering statement is that the natural man is shut out of all that, he just cannot know the deep things of God, he just cannot know all these things, for the natural eye has not seen, the natural ear has not heard, the natural heart has not conceived or perceived all this. The natural man is utterly at a discount, disadvantage and incapacitated in the realm of the things of God. That is a very thoroughgoing statement, very drastic, very comprehensive, and all that was closed down to man when Adam disobeyed God.

Something, then, has got to be done in man if he is to come back into the realm where the deep things of God are an open book to him, where the things which eye never saw, ear never heard, heart never perceived, are all open; the heritage and the inheritance of man. Something has got to happen to change that state and make that true. It is stated not as something that is going to be later on. This does not belong to the hereafter, to heaven, when we shall see. No, this is something

which came in on the day of Pentecost. "God has revealed them unto us by His Spirit." The lamp has been relit, the light has been reborn, the faculty which is the lamp of spiritual life, light, understanding, knowledge, perception and inheritance, has been brought into new life. That is the new birth. It is the spirit of man which lost its power of knowing God and the things of God, brought back into life as from the dead, brought back into the light as out of darkness, brought back into knowledge as out from ignorance, brought back into sight as out from blindness. This is the very beginning of the Christian life. Oh, if that were entered into, apprehended and really was true of every Christian, am I not right in saying that that which exists would not exist? And that is putting it rather mildly. So we begin in nature with an incapacitated man where God is concerned and all His things, and then, with the coming of the Holy Spirit and the receiving of the Holy Spirit and the work of the Holy Spirit in new birth, now man is capacitated. He has a faculty that he never before possessed in nature quickened and made alive.

This whole matter is first of all initial as to a faculty. We have got to realise this, and this is a point upon which so much depends, a faculty there renewed, quickened and energised by the Spirit of God, for knowing the deep things of God. It is not just a matter of information from without. It is not just a matter of what you get in addresses, teachings, ministries, messages and books. You can just cram yourself with information about God and the things of God, you can read it up and get all that kind of knowledge and give it out as though it were your knowledge, and yet it is second-hand. What the Spirit of God does is to make everything original in us, firsthand, and if it is not that, we are simply living on something objective outside of ourselves, such as sermons and what not.

Vital Union with God

But I said 'vital' union with God. That is indicated in further words in this chapter. "*Who among men knows the things of a man, save the spirit of the man, which is in him?*" Well, brethren, you and I can understand one another, up to a point at any rate, just because we are fellow-men; we know how men think and how men feel and how men act. We are men, and there is something in us which we have in common with which is a man's life, which gives us ability to understand one another. "Even so", says the apostle, "the things of God none knows save the Spirit of God". Only the Spirit of God understands the things of God, because They have everything in common. Now, the natural man does not understand God or the things of God. We know that, even though we are Christians, how limited we are in our own natural life in understanding God. We have got to have some knowledge and understanding of God that we do not possess naturally, otherwise we are defeated and baffled. Only the Spirit of God understands God because They are God in common.

Now, if the Spirit of God comes into us and begins to operate in us, we are lifted on to a higher level altogether than the man level, and the Spirit begins through this renewed faculty to make us able to understand the things of God, and so it is to him to whom the Spirit reveals. It begins with a faculty in us. Oh, it is a wonderful thing, I think the most wonderful thing in the whole Christian life, apart from the grace of God, this faculty. It is a tremendous thing to have got the key, got the secret, for it to be there, in union with the Spirit of God to have a faculty in yourself for seeing and grasping the things of God. It is the greatest thing that we can possibly have. Just think of all this that is closed to the natural man, the deep things of God and all that is said about the deep things of God, and then follow on and say, "God has revealed them to us", and it is because He has done something in us. Are you in the good of that? Oh, it is not perfect. It is initial by a faculty being renewed, and so the man is a changed being with this very faculty. But it is also progressive, and it is progressive along two lines or in two ways.

By Revelation

Two words are used in the Scripture. "*God has revealed them to us by his Spirit*", that is, by revelation. Now, let me say with all the emphasis that I can command that that does not mean a new revelation additional to the Scriptures, but it does mean revelation of what, even in the Scriptures, is not open to the natural mind. Revelation is as to God's meaning in His Word. You know the prayer of the apostle: "*that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory, may give unto you a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of Him*" (Eph. 1:17). This is to Christians...

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