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A Talk to Young Christians on the Nature of the Christian Life

by T. Austin-Sparks

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And it is sensed: sometimes it is almost uncanny how men of this world sense it. They are not able to explain it; they are not able to say why they take these attitudes toward us; they just cannot tell us. In fact, if you ask, 'Why do you look at me like that? Why do you feel like that about me?', they say, 'Well, I don't know why, but somehow or other... somehow or other...!' You see, that is just it; they can't explain it, they don't understand it at all. But - but - there it is: a fundamental difference of constitution. You might be people of different races altogether, who have no understanding of one another.

Well, it is like that. The Spirit coming in makes us different, and it is just that difference that is the basis of everything for the future. Never try to modify or reduce that difference. But, at the same time, never make it artificial: never make people think you are a 'goody-goody', that you are 'putting it on' and trying to be different - none of that. You are different, right enough; you won't have to 'put on' anything if you live in the Spirit. We are constituted differently, and we must understand that that is a fact. That is really what it means to be 'born of the Spirit'.

Led by the Spirit

Now, we have been constituted by the Spirit according to a Divine and heavenly order, and the course of our Christian life should be one of getting further and further away from the old order. I

believe that that is what is meant by the words here in this chapter: "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God"(v. 14). "Led by the Spirit of God". Now you may take hold of that and apply it to 'leading' in many things. It may apply to being 'led' about *things*; this is what we call 'guidance'. But, whatever it means for such guidance in particular matters, I believe the setting of these words demands a wider interpretation than that. You cannot lift these things out of their great context; and this is, as we have seen, a tremendous context - 'from eternity to eternity'.

You see, God started up something - that is the point that this chapter brings into view - He started up something, before this world was, where *we* are concerned. "Whom he foreknew, he... foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son" (v. 29). That is, right back there, God started up something, and swept down into the ages with that purpose, moving toward that great goal. And what was that goal? - conformity to the image of His Son.

Now, what is being 'led by the Spirit'? Well, take the illustration of Israel. God came down into Egypt, into the dark world of their bondage and tyranny in Egypt: He came down with His great purpose; He took possession of them; and then He gave them the symbol and figure of the Holy Spirit in the Pillar of Cloud and Fire. Paul says: 'They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud' (1 Cor. 10:2). What was the pillar of cloud and fire given for? Well, it is an illustration. It is a type of the Holy Spirit. It was given to lead them into the Land of Promise, where God had intended them to be. That was the purpose for which He had come down into Egypt, and got hold of them, and pulled them out, and brought them into the Wilderness. The Spirit was ever moving ahead of them, in the Pillar, to get them into the Land.

That is being "led by the Spirit". As the Lord said, speaking of His people: "Israel is my son... Let my son go..." (Ex. 4:22,23) - 'Now these are the sons of God, who are led by the Spirit of God'. But what does it mean? It means that you are moving on, ever moving on in this way of the Spirit, in this leaving of the old order further and further behind, and getting nearer and nearer to the heavenly order. Now, if the Christian life is normal, this is true of the Christian life. This is not something abnormal; this is 'the *normal* Christian life'! This is what is real about it - that the more you go on with the Lord, the less and less do you find it possible to accept this world and to settle down here, and the further you seem to get away from it. Or it seems to get away from you. The things of the Lord get nearer and nearer, and more and more engrossing, taking up more and more of your life. You find that, whereas at one time, you could divide your time, you could spread it out over things, now you are more and more being absorbed - not obsessed, but absorbed in the things of the Lord; you have not time for other things.

Even your work - well, you go to work, you do your work, you give yourself to your work, you do it honestly... but - but - the thing that has got a grip of you inside, is the Lord's interests - the Lord's interests! 'Being let go', you go to your own people! (Acts 4:23); and they are the Lord's people. Is that not true? If you are going on with the Lord, oh, what you want is more and more of that which belongs to your own constitution, the heavenly order of things. That is what it means to be "led by the Spirit of God". Whatever 'guidance by the Spirit' means in things, in details, this is what it means here in this great context: it means that the Spirit is leading us on nearer and nearer to the fulness of Christ. We can, of course, test our lives by that.

Spiritual Qualification

The next thing, in the life of the Spirit, is that the Holy Spirit gifts us, and qualifies us for a place, a part, in this great purpose of God. This again is something that I want you to take to heart, because it means so much. In this realm, the matter of natural qualifications is not the argument at all. I remember - and you must forgive if I put in a word of testimony, because I want to keep this near to life, because it is real - I remember how, early in my Christian life, I was very conscious of many lacks and deficiencies and defectivenesses, and things that I wished I had had. There were ambitions that I was never able to realise; desires that I had in this life for learning, for becoming qualified in this or in that, and so on: many doors were closed to me when I came to the Lord, and so I had to face life pretty much without this background that I wanted.

And then I came early to see that this matter of natural qualifications is not the argument with the Lord at all. I saw this from both sides. On the one side, there are many who have very great natural qualifications, or qualifications acquired through study, or through all manner of advantages, but they are not necessarily spiritual people. And it never does mean - and you can prove this - that, because you have got a tremendous background of scholarship, education, or qualification of that kind, you have a special aptitude for grasping spiritual things. I have been amazed, again and again, when meeting some quite 'highbrow' people - Christians - who have had all the advantages of academic training, to find that, when I have talked to them about the Lord, they just have not known what I was talking about. They can't grasp it at all! And then I have met others, who have none of those qualifications and advantages, and you can go with them on spiritual things as far as you like, and they have got it - they see.

That is a great thing to learn early in the Christian life: it is not what I have, or what I have not got, naturally - the Holy Spirit is qualification for what God wants! The New Testament speaks of 'gifts of the Spirit' - and, while we have some catalogues of those gifts, I am quite certain we have not got a full list of the 'gifts of the Holy Spirit'; not all the gifts that the Holy Spirit will give are mentioned - qualifications, equipments, for a place in the whole range of Divine interests and values. Do take that to your heart. It may be that you are one of the least, and that you feel there is not much hope for you; but, if you have got the Holy Spirit, He can and will qualify you for something that is your particular part in the whole. And people can say: 'You know, he, or she, - not very much naturally, perhaps; you would not think very much of them if you looked at them; but, but... he counts; she counts, you know; and this is the way in which they count.' It is like that; the Holy Spirit has come to give us something we have not got naturally, and we cannot get naturally - it is the particular equipment of the Holy Spirit.

Now, don't think in terms of wonderful, public gifts; it may never be that. In some simple, quiet way, you may be an effective faculty in the whole body corporate. That is what this means, to have the Holy Spirit: that we are something more in accountability than we are or could be naturally, even at our best. It is something different. The Lord will not always tell you what your gift is, but other people will know - that is just where you count for the Lord; just how you, particularly, mean something for the Lord.

Corporate Vocation

I want to come to one more very important aspect of this whole matter of the Spirit. Supposing we take an illustration; perhaps we can get at it best that way. Let us go back to the Old Testament, to the last section of the book of Exodus, which, as you know, contains the whole account of the making of the Tabernacle in the Wilderness. And you will know that it was through the Holy Spirit

that the whole thing was made, constructed; that the Spirit came upon certain men for that work, and then, under those Spirit-governed men, gathered all the people together. *All* the people came into action.

While it does not definitely say so, it as good as says that the whole nation was in this business. They were all doing something about it; they all had something to give. Some had linen to give; some had other materials to give; but they all had something. I suppose you could see 'sewing parties' all over the camp, and men at work busy at this thing and that - some on wood, some on gold, some on silver, some on brass - all the different materials; everywhere they were occupied with the work, and it was all under the direction and instruction and counsel of Spirit-filled men. That is to say, they were all under the government of the Spirit. The Anointing, so to speak, spread itself all over the whole mighty host for work.

Now my point is this: the Holy Spirit creates corporate vocation. (Is that too difficult in language?) Just think: here are some women making a curtain for the Tabernacle. Well, are they going to have their own little 'tabernacle' made of their one little curtain, all to themselves? Here are some men making a part - just a part - of wood, perhaps to be overlaid with gold: is that the Tabernacle? Are they going to have a special little tabernacle of that thing that they are making - a little church of their own? It is nonsense, you see. Now you see what I am getting at. All this, by the Spirit, is one thing - it is a corporate vocation: that is, they are not each living and working for their own little bit, they are living and working for the whole. They have got the vision of the whole, and their whole life is taken up with the whole - not with just their little bit as an end in itself. They are living and working for the Tabernacle in completeness. The Holy Spirit has brought them together, and bound them into a one-ness in corporate vocation. All the vocation is one, because they are under one Spirit.

Well, that is an Old Testament illustration; but in the New Testament, what does that mean? What does that mean now? If you and I are really under the government of the Holy Spirit, under the anointing of the Spirit, as we should be, we shall not have any little private things of our own, any little 'hole in a corner' business of ours, any detached and unrelated thing to which we are giving ourselves. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of unity, and of unity in vocation. What it will amount to, dear friends, is this: we shall live for the whole. And if it is a matter of our local relationships - such as here - none of us is to be living other than for the whole: we ought to be living for the complete thing; the corporate vocation ought to have got a grip of us. Our position must be: 'I am not living and working as an individual: I am living and working as a part of a whole. And, in the appointment of God, for the time being, my local 'whole' is here, and I am living for that; I work for that; that is my vocation.'

Now, there is a tremendous amount bound up with that, if you realise it; and it is all in the Word of God. I am giving you in a few words the sum of so much. So many people are wondering about their service: wanting to be in the Lord's work, or to do something for the Lord - some sort of ministry, some sort of work - and to know what their work is; and they are asking: What is my work? What is my ministry? What is my job? It is always 'my', 'my', 'my'... The answer is: Your job is 'they', is 'them'. Your vocation is a related thing. You will find the Holy Spirit coming in and using you when you link yourself on with all the rest, and become part of the whole. If you keep yourself in any detachment, He may not do anything at all with you; He will just leave you; you will be doing nothing, and be counting for nothing. We have to recognise this great law of Divine revelation, that the Spirit makes us one in a great vocation. The vocation is not our personal vocation at all; it is the vocation of the whole; it is the vocation of the Church.

You see, we are really in "Ephesians". "Walk worthily of the calling" (or 'vocation') "wherewith ye were called" (4:1); and the context all concerns the *relatedness* - our relationship one to another in vocation. This is not my vocation; this is not *your* vocation, as something personal, as something detached. It is the *Church's* vocation; it is not yours: it is not mine. Whenever people go off on a personal, unrelated, line (and I am speaking after fifty years' experience), they become an end in themselves; and when they go, that is the end. The thing started with them, and it finished with them; and now you have got to start all over again. I have seen this sort of thing happen again and again - people who were unrelated in their work, and when they went, that was the end of the work.

But that is not God's idea, and you will agree with me that we don't want it to be like that. We are not living unto ourselves, and dying unto ourselves - not by any means. If we are going right on, and the Lord's work is going on and on, we must recognise that the vocation is a corporate vocation; it is the vocation of the Church, and only of individuals as in a related way. This is a very important thing to recognise. And you come into blessing that way; you come right in - no detachment, no unrelatedness: the Lord can in some way let you contribute to the whole, and there is a real blessedness about it. Whereas, in a personal way, you make no contribution at all; in an unrelated way you would not mean anything - at any rate, the Lord is not putting His seal upon that - He will, if you come right into oneness with all the rest.

And so we go back to our illustration from the Old Testament. The people found their inspiration, and the Lord's blessing upon them, as they saw all the time the whole, lived for the whole, and regarded everything, every detail, as a part of the whole. And *you* live for the whole! If the local company is where the Lord has put you, live for it, work for it; not for yourself, but for it. But even so, as a local company, don't just work for your own ends. Have the whole view of God's Church, and you will find that the Lord's blessing is there. There may be difficulties, but the Lord will stand by you; and there will be something that would not be there if you just became a little company by yourselves, in a corner, living for yourselves, turned in on yourselves. No! have this great vision of God's purpose.

Well, now, these are a few things about the Life of the Spirit - this Divine character of things in this dispensation. We started from within - the Spirit doing His work within, working out in relation to others; then the Spirit of unity, the Spirit of purpose, the Spirit of vocation, embracing the whole Church of God, the whole instrument of His eternal purpose.

Now I suggest you go back to Romans 8, and read it once more, very carefully, fragment by fragment, and, as you ought to do in all your Bible reading, ask yourself: What has that said? What is it that that says? And what does that say to me? Not just, What does it say in the Bible? but, What does that say to *me*? How do *I* get involved in that? I think, if you will just read it again, you will find that that chapter will take on new meaning, new light, and new values: because, as I have said, it is the link - *the* link. You have come in now; you were out, but you have come in. Where are you going? Well, the end of that chapter is: conformity to the image of His Son. That is where you are going. How? By the Spirit within, and living in the Spirit.