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## Parenthetical Christians

*by T. Austin-Sparks*

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*"And it came to pass, that, while Apollos was at Corinth, Paul having passed through the upper country came to Ephesus, and found certain disciples: and he said unto them, Did ye receive the Holy Spirit when ye believed?" (Acts 19:1-2).*

### **A Lack of the Spirit That May Accompany Believing**

I want to speak to you for this little while on what I believe to be a fact. I have no theory, no systematized doctrine on 'a second blessing', but I believe that there is something represented by this word - indeed, I *know* there is something which is a fact. That Paul should ask a question in this form, "Did ye receive the Holy Spirit when ye believed?" (for this is the proper translation; not, "Have ye received the Holy Spirit since ye believed?") implies that *some kind of relationship with Christ is possible without receiving the Holy Spirit*. That seems to me to be implicit in this very question. Paul at once regarded these disciples as believers, but he had a question about them and put his question to them.

There is such a thing as being a 'parenthetical' Christian - one in between two things. Here the parenthesis was between believing in Christ and receiving the Holy Spirit. Those believers were, so to speak, in brackets. But note, this is not the normal New Testament position. Again and again, right at the beginning - at the time of believing - believers received the Holy Spirit in a very definite way. The Apostles' attitude toward this matter is perfectly clear; they held that believing alone was not

sufficient. They would make sure that those who had believed received the Holy Spirit. I am not stopping to give you the instances, for you know them. This situation at Ephesus is not the normal in the New Testament. Perhaps we can call it the unusual, but it can exist and I fear very often it does. I am almost inclined to say that to be in brackets, to be in a parenthesis, to be in between believing in Christ and receiving the Holy Spirit, has become the normal.

### **The Holy Spirit Consummates Relationship to Christ**

This means that there is something that consummates relationship to Christ. Apart from that something, Christian life is largely negative or neutral, in a position or state of suspension, indefinite, tentative, as though there is something more yet to happen. Those disciples had believed, but there was something yet that needed to be. That is how it works out, there is no doubt about it. There are multitudes who have believed - believed that Jesus is the Christ, believed in the facts of His birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension, and even of His coming again, and much more of the Christian doctrine - and, having believed, they have come into a certain relationship with Him; and yet there is a pause, there seems to lack something, and as time goes on that lack becomes more accentuated, more apparent, more real to those concerned and to others who know them. In the Church they are either negatives or neutrals, or somehow suspended, tentative. You feel that something has to happen to them, something is needed.

Is that what Paul found? I am very sure that it was, and he could not accept that condition. He at once sought to get to the root of it and to have it put right; and it was found to be that, though they had believed - had accepted certain truths which resulted in their accepting Jesus - they were not right out, liberated, regnant, effective. Something still had to take place. Their relationship with Christ had to be in some way brought to a fulness, a completeness.

This consummation (as we see it in every case in the New Testament, and as I have no doubt many of us know in experience) places life on an altogether new basis. Indeed, it places life upon what we call a supernatural level. There is no doubt about it in the case of those mentioned in the New Testament. Witness was borne that this does bring in supernatural features and factors, and puts life on that level.

### **The Effects of the Spirit**

#### *(a) Transformed People*

In the first place, the persons themselves are so different. You may meet them and see them as ordinary people, amongst people, but you meet also an extra factor. You find that in them is another Presence. It is not they only whom you meet. That Other is the Holy Spirit, the Lord Himself, and He is no neutral. If the Holy Spirit is really there, a life is not negative and neutral, suspended, tentative. A certain positiveness is brought into the life itself, into the individual. Such are not just lost in a crowd. Every one of them is vital, every one of them is a life point, every one of them carries something more than himself or herself, and that extra is the Holy Spirit, it is Christ. It makes a tremendous difference to us, and the difference is that we are not just and only ourselves - what we are in ourselves. There is this Other that is met, that is touched, and that touches. So it was, so it is, so it should be. Probably Paul saw this group of believers at Ephesus, and found nothing more in them than what they were in themselves - a lot of people gathered, perhaps, with a common interest, but no registration, no 'salt'. He said - 'What is the matter? Did you receive the Holy Spirit

when you believed? It is difficult to believe that you did'. Such a receiving makes a difference to the persons concerned.

*(b) Supernatural Resources Available*

Then it brings on to a supernatural basis as to resources - that we are not left to our own resources, to draw only upon our own life. No, when *we* are at an end, that is *not* the end; when *we* are spent, that is *not* exhaustion. Oh, let this come to us as a real challenge! So often we take ourselves as the measure of things. 'Oh, I am so tired, I feel so bad, I do not feel I can go to the meeting' - and so we stay away, taking our own condition as being all that there is to count on. There is another level on which to live, another basis; and if you like to put it to the test, if you really have received the Holy Spirit; you can lay hold of the Holy Spirit in the moment of most utter weakness and find yourself capable of meeting a tremendous demand, of standing up to something for which you are totally unable in yourself. There is no place, and it is altogether wrong, for any Christian to say, 'Well, I cannot, therefore I do not try; I am made like this and I have not got this gift and that, and I have not this qualification and that' - and thus to settle down and become neutral. I am saying to you that if you have received the Holy Spirit such an attitude is wrong and unnecessary. When the Holy Spirit is present, we are put upon a supernatural basis for resources, and we can prove again and again that when we have absolutely nothing, and it would be utter madness and folly for us to essay, we can lay hold of God the Holy Ghost and go through triumphantly and come out at the other end with more life than we had at the beginning - contrary to nature, supernatural.

I said I am talking about a fact, not a theory of 'a second blessing'; and I can speak to you out of personal experience of the fact. I know what I am talking about. It is a fact. The Holy Spirit within does mean another level for resource, which is not just our natural level; we are not left to ourselves; so do not contemplate any proposition from the standpoint of what you are or are not in yourself. That standpoint in itself may be perfectly true; but there can be a laying hold upon the Lord by faith, saying, "*I can do all things in him that strengtheneth me*" (Phil. 4:13). You are surprised at what you can do if you know this great reality of the indwelling Spirit; you are capable of things you never thought you would ever do. It ought to be like that. That is the romance of a true life in the Spirit.

*(c) The Gift of a New Faculty*

Then again, there is a new faculty given to us by the receiving of the Holy Spirit. It is here that wonder follows wonder. How can I illustrate that? Will you suffer a personal testimony? For many years I preached, but I had to get my material from books and all sorts of directions, and gather it together and make up something to preach; and although I preached it with all my might as my conviction, I had obtained it in that way, and the one thing I longed for through those years was something direct with and from heaven - an immediate, direct speaking of the Lord in my heart through His Word so that I could speak out what the Lord was saying to *me*. And there came that great crisis of Romans 6, and that is what issued. From that time to this, by God's grace I have been able to see in the Scriptures much more than could be known by mere intellectual effort. I can take the Word of God and see through the letter of it to meanings, to principles, into the thought of God. In saying a thing like that, I do not presume to suggest that I have ranged it all. We are lost in this boundless ocean; but it is something to have a faculty for perceiving. It gives you another world beyond your own. That is what I mean. The Holy Spirit gives that faculty for seeing the more, seeing the deeper - not for our becoming fantastic, mystical, occult, and that sort of thing, but really giving

to us an inner eye. It is a wonderful thing. Do you say that all who have believed have got that? I am far from sure whether these things are true in the case of all believers.

### **The Spirit Known Only Through the Cross**

You notice that there is given to us in this passage the great truth that this receiving of the Spirit, with these wonderful results that I have mentioned and, of course, many more, is the issue of Christ's death and resurrection into which we are placed by faith - what we have called identification with Christ in death burial and resurrection; for that is what Paul here laid down in calling upon them to be baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. All the doctrine of identification with Christ in death and resurrection is gathered up in baptism. Dear believer, even though it be at a late hour in your life, you must get off the old ground of the old natural life. If that is governing, if that is controlling, if that is your main or sole sphere, you must get out of it, and you can only get out of it through death and resurrection.

The death of the Lord Jesus was His exodus. *"Moses and Elijah... spake of his decease (his exodus) which he was about to accomplish" (Luke 9:31)*. What an exodus! Emancipation, release from all the limitations of this life as to time, space, and everything else! All those limitations broken down by His Cross! We are released by the Cross. If we really know the Cross as an experience, as something into which, by faith, we definitely stand for the end of the control, government, and limitation (as well as of all the evil) of the old natural life, and if by faith we lay hold on Christ risen, as being ourselves risen in Him, we are released. Oh, is not that the need of so many Christians to be released, to be loosed, to be set free inside? They are tied up. We have to say of certain people, 'They are all tied up in themselves'. Now do not go and get into tangles and fogs about 'a second blessing'. The heart of the matter is here. The Holy Spirit comes upon the ground of resurrection-union, and all the rest follows. Let us challenge our own hearts. Are we in the realm of those still tentative, still suspended, still tied up, still governed by our natural life and make-up? Then there is something wrong; and it may be in your case, as it was in mine, that after a good many years of believing, of being the Lord's servant, *the* thing happened. I am always hesitant to say that I received the Holy Spirit then, because that would be to state a kind of doctrine to which everybody else ought to conform; but I know the thing happened. The day I apprehended in a new way the meaning of Christ in death, burial and resurrection, the Holy Spirit followed on that and did something in me. It has been going on increasingly ever since and still has to go a very long way, but that was the turning point. While I would be most sorry to create difficulties for you over this and set you worrying about your own condition, I do say to you that there is something more for a believer who is still in this limited, parenthetical position - a believer still 'in brackets'. The Lord get rid of those iron brackets and make us know what life by the Spirit really is!

There are two safeguarding words necessary in this connection as I close. The sense of this lack has sent many off into an intensive soul-force quest for an experience, and thereby the door has been opened for the most serious counterfeit work of Satan, with direful issues. Remember, it is not our soul-force that is the door, but the Cross, our death with Christ.

Then, it may very well be that many - unlike these disciples at Ephesus - have received the Spirit, but have not walked *by* the Spirit, and have consequently failed to be led by Him into all the truth.