

'As It Was in the beginning...' (Continued)

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the foundational principles of early Christianity, emphasizing the transformative role of the Holy Spirit and the distinction between the natural and spiritual man.

Scripture: Acts 2:1

Topics: "The Role of the Holy Spirit", "Spiritual Transformation"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significance of the 'beginning' in the New Testament, illustrating how early believers faced a conflict between the natural man and the spiritual man due to the transformative work of the Holy Spirit. He explains that the early church was not a new religion or teaching but a movement characterized by the sovereign action of the Holy Spirit, which challenged existing traditions and mentalities. Sparks highlights the necessity for believers to recognize the absolute authority of the Holy Spirit over their understanding and practices, as seen in the experiences of apostles like Peter. The sermon underscores the importance of spiritual education in discerning the differences between the natural and spiritual realms, and the need for continual submission to God's leading. Ultimately, the message calls for a return to the original principles of faith as established at the beginning of the church.

Transcript

We have seen that the "beginning" relates to the earliest part of New Testament times, not even to the latest parts of the New Testament. The latest writings are characterized by correctives, recalls and appeals for recovery, showing that all too soon in apostolic times, things began to deviate from the first principles and to change in both nature and form. These changes will be given more detailed consideration here as we go on.

For the present we confine ourselves to one more general and basic factor from which all else takes its rise. We have already pointed out that the possession of the Holy Spirit within the spirit of the believer produces a new and different "species" or genus, a new kind of person, the kind referred to by the apostle Paul as "he that is spiritual", which he differentiates from "the natural [soulical or psychical] man". This is the new man which is the subject of all New Testament concern.

It is not just that an element called "spirituality" has been taken on, but a fundamentally different kind of man has been born by the operation of the Holy Spirit. Albeit, the natural or psychical man remains, and remains a force to be reckoned with. On one side, spiritual education consists of the growing realization and understanding of how utterly different from the Spirit of God the natural man is. The tendencies,

proclivities, directives, conceptions, etc. of the natural man work in ways that are just the opposite of those of the Spirit in the new man. This is one of the most obvious things in the early chapters of the book of Acts. In those chapters we have the essence of what came in on the day of Pentecost as the very nature and principle of the new dispensation. It is an education to observe the way devoutly religious and wholly sincere men were being educated in regard to this fundamental difference between the natural, even though religious, man and "he that is spiritual". The inclusive and all-embracing factor was the absolute sovereignty of the Holy Spirit as the executor of the risen and exalted Lord Jesus.

A strong, very strong, carry-over of the Old Testament system and mentality was present in those first responsible men such as Peter, James and John. Largely because of this one factor, this mentality, the advent of the Spirit had to be "like the sound of a mighty rushing wind". Not only a sound, but the force. The one initial necessity was that those concerned should realize that things were taken altogether and absolutely out of THEIR hands; that whatever their hands might imply -- e.g. mentality, predisposition, reasoning, tradition, conception, interpretation, etc. -- the Spirit of God was above that, either as contrary to it or as having a meaning which they had never seen. That is the first factor in the practical meaning of "As it was in the beginning".

It would seem that, while those concerned realized the force of the happening, they had yet to learn the meaning of it, for from then onwards the conflict between the natural man and the spiritual man, IN THEM, was the way of their education. The transition from Judaism to the full implications of the new dispensation of the Spirit was fraught with some hard and painful battles and revolutions. Repeatedly we see a crisis presenting itself on this issue and the balances trembling between the old order and the new. Not, let it be emphasized, between the world and evil men and Christianity (that was another aspect), but between the inheritance, training and tradition of good and committed men ("devout" they are often called) and an altogether new heavenly meaning and mindedness.

Let us repeat: the drastic actions from heaven, as in the case of Pentecost in general and of Peter and Saul of Tarsus in particular, demonstrated that the new order was new and not a carry-over of anything. It was a mastery, a domination, a Lordship!

Peter, on the ground of his interpretation of Old Testament Scriptures about eating the unclean, might remonstrate with the Lord, but Peter's entire apostleship and usefulness would depend upon allowing the Lord to know better, and submitting. It was a crisis in which Peter was on the threshold of a discovery which absolutely amazed him and left him without any explanation except: "God did it", and "who was I that I should withstand God?" The principle herein contained is the battleground of the continuous question of less or more power and spiritual fullness.

The natural, psychical, man is positively incorrigible and inveterate in the matter of crystallizing, fixing, legalizing, and putting into final forms. He just MUST systematize and finalize. Although he may not know what he means, he will sing with gusto, "As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be", because he is wedded to formulas. He resorts almost mechanically to "drawing up something" to put it into a framework and make a box for it. Never has the Holy Spirit done something but men have subsequently taken the features of it and compiled therefrom a manual or text-book and have sought to impose it upon the Holy Spirit and the church as binding and essential. The beginning shows that the Holy Spirit will have none of this. For Himself absolute liberty of action and method is demanded and never to be denied Him. From a consideration of historic and organized Christianity it is wellnigh impossible to realize that there are certain things that Christianity was NOT at the beginning.

For instance, it was NOT a new religion. Christianity was not set over against or alongside of other "religions", so that it would be included in "Comparative Religions". Although some of the apostles themselves were tardy in realizing that Judaism was finished with by Christ and set aside, "lock, stock and barrel"; and only Stephen, and perhaps a few with him, had seen the completeness of the break, for which he had to pay with his life, yet this fact had steadily to be faced, and its acceptance -- fully or reservedly -- determined the degree of their spiritual measure. Paul is to be accounted for on this one issue supremely. Their thinking, reasoning and handling of their prejudices had to be done AFTER the embarrassing experiences and accomplished facts. They started with "acts", not with a new religion.

Further, Christianity was not a new "teaching". There is nothing in the whole record upon which to build a theory or affirmation that the apostles went out with "The Teaching of Jesus" as a stereotyped system. They were not propagating in the pagan, heathen or Jewish world new doctrines as such or a new system of truth. Explanations, which became the teaching or doctrine of the church, were reserved for those who had responded in faith to the declaration of certain fundamental FACTS relating to the person of Jesus Christ and these were few. The most that they did was to support and substantiate their testimony TO HIM from the Scriptures.

Once again: Christianity was not originally thought of as a new movement. No plans of campaign were laid. There was no policy. Organization was almost entirely absent. The very small degree of this was subsequently forced upon them by the embarrassment of the very vitality of the spiritual life. A thought-out campaign did not exist. To set up, form, launch, or bring into being, or found a new society, sect or community, was not in their minds. Outsiders put the labels on, perhaps because of the SPIRITUAL distinctiveness of the believers, but they never adopted a special title for themselves. The really distinguishing characteristic was not the name of a movement, but the presence of a mystery to all the outside world. Every attempt to explain them by a label, such as Christians, The Way, Sect, just missed the point. There does not exist a formula for or an explanation of life, whether natural or divine; and if there were, it would be like trying to put the Pacific Ocean into a bottle. So much the worse for the bottle, as Jesus said about the new wine and the old wine-skins. It was this "law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus" which accounted for the experience, explained it in teaching, energized the action, and produced the "form" -- the ORGANIC form at the beginning.

Here, then, we have confined ourselves to the overall, inclusive factor at the "Beginning", that is the absolute sovereign liberty, government, mastery and direction of the Spirit of the enthroned Christ in heaven. This demanded a transcending, superceding, and subjugating of all the assertions of the natural man. This is a crisis and then a progress. As we have implied, this had an effect both as to the relationship with the world and the developments within the church. The former of these two aspects will retain us in our next chapter.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/t-austin-sparks/as-it-was-in-the-beginning-continued/>

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