

'neither... nor... but...'

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Lord Jesus takes up individual lives and histories to produce eternal values, and introduces a new spiritual dispensation through the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: Deuteronomy 12:5-11, Matthew 18:20, Matthew 28:19-20, John 1:51, John 3:6, John 3:16, John 4:20-24, John 11:25, Acts 15:17, James 2:7

Topics: "Worship", "New Dispensation"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the transformative nature of worship in his sermon 'neither... nor... but...', highlighting Jesus' declaration that true worship is not confined to specific locations but is to be done in spirit and truth. He illustrates how the coming of Christ marks a new dispensation, shifting the focus from physical places of worship to a spiritual relationship with God. By examining individual encounters with Jesus, Sparks shows that every person's history can be transformed into a significant part of God's story. He stresses the importance of recognizing this new spiritual order, which transcends geographical and cultural boundaries, and calls for believers to embrace their identity as part of the Church, which is defined by the presence of Christ among them. Ultimately, the sermon encourages a deeper understanding of worship that is rooted in the Spirit rather than in traditional forms.

Transcript

"Our fathers worshipped in this mountain; and ye say that in Jerusalem is the place where men ought to worship. Jesus saith unto her, Woman, believe me, the hour cometh, when neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem, shall ye worship the Father... But the hour cometh, and now is, when the true worshippers shall worship the Father in spirit and truth: for such doth the Father seek to be his worshippers. God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship in spirit and truth" (John 4:20,21,23,24).

That is our basic passage for this time, and we are going to gather some other passages around it:

"But unto the place which the Lord your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put his name there, even unto his habitation shall ye seek, and thither thou shalt come... then it shall come to pass that the place which the Lord your God shall choose to cause his name to dwell there, thither shall ye bring all that I command you; ...If the place which the Lord thy God shall choose to put his name there be too far from thee, then thou shalt kill of thy herd and of thy flock, which the Lord hath given thee, as I have commanded thee, and thou shalt eat within thy gates, after all the desire of thy soul" (Deuteronomy 12:5,11,21).

"For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew 18:20).

"Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit... and lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19,20).

"Do not they blaspheme the honourable name by which ye are called?" (James 2:7). The marginal - alternative to the latter phrase is: "the honourable name which was called upon you".

"That the residue of men may seek after the Lord, and all the nations, upon whom my name is called" (Acts 15:17).

Now back to the Gospel by John: and before we come to the particular matter which is to occupy us at this time, there are one or two quite simple, yet I think very helpful things to point out.

The Significance of Individuals

This Gospel, as you know, is very largely a story of individual contacts with the Lord Jesus. There is quite a series of such personal and individual contacts with the Lord Jesus, or contacts of the Lord Jesus with them, recorded in this Gospel. It is very instructive and very helpful to note the use of individuals and of individual history which the Lord made and took up, to provide some of the most significant things that He ever said. We are not going, of course, to follow this through, but I want to point it out, because I feel that it holds something of great value for you and for me.

You will recall some of these individuals, the first of whom was Nathanael. That interview between the Lord and Nathanael produced something very wonderful. The Lord took up that man's history and used it for values which continue to this very time. We will leave that for the moment.

Next was Nicodemus - and everybody knows about Nicodemus! How the Lord took up that man's personal history and used it for tremendous purpose, very great value. Everybody will agree that that part of the Gospel which is now marked off as chapter 3, if it were taken out of the Bible, would represent a very great loss indeed. But you must remember that all that we have in that wonderful so-called third chapter of John, so rich, so full, so deep, is the product of the contact of the Lord with an individual. The Lord is taking hold of one person's spiritual life and history and using it.

You come next to that which is going to engage our attention especially at this time, in what is marked as chapter 4: this woman of Samaria. What an interview! And what a lot the Lord made of that woman's history! What a lot came out when that woman, who might never have become a part of history on record, came into touch with the Lord Jesus! And it was all because He came into touch with her. It was a tremendous thing. A person like that, of so little worth and account amongst the people of this world. She would be utterly despised, ignored, set aside. But because the Lord Jesus came into touch with that life she is on record for two thousand years, and we don't know how much longer - certainly for eternity.

We pass from chapter 4 to that poor fellow at the Pool of Bethesda. Indeed, he was a neglected man. He was not counted of much significance. Everybody forced their way in front of him and pushed him into the back, out of sight and out of account. But when the Lord Jesus touched that man's life he comes into history.

And so you go on, coming on to the man born blind - and what a story that is, occupying this large section covered by the whole of chapters 8 and 9! There is the man - and you know what the people of the day thought about him! As the story unfolds you see that they had not much room for him. Indeed, they said: "Thou wast altogether born in sins, and dost thou teach us?" (John 9:34). 'Who are you to have anything to say at all? How dare you!' Well, that was the value of that man in their eyes. But the Lord Jesus came into touch with that life, and here he is - one of the Bible characters. And when the Bible takes up a person that is no small thing, is it? The Bible gives eternal values.

And through you go until you come to Lazarus. Here is another individual - and what an immense thing that the Lord came into touch with a man in a little village some five or six miles, or perhaps less, outside Jerusalem, and in that little home! It is an immortal story, but is made that because the Lord Jesus touched that life.

Now, I think you see the point. There are tremendous values to be taken up and carried on from any life and any personal history when the Lord Jesus really gets His hand on that life. It is a simple thing, but very encouraging. If all these people were amongst the world's great and recognized and honourable, well, our hearts would sink and we would say: 'All right - but that does not apply to me.' But when you take up some of these people, at least (even if you are not an important Nicodemus), the thing still applies because it is just what the Lord is doing now. And all I am wanting to say about this at the outset is that it is something to note in this Gospel: that when the Lord Jesus gets His hand upon a life - and it may be an insignificant life - and when He gets His hand upon a man or a woman, who may be of no account, humanly speaking, He makes eternal history out of that life. He lays hold of their own history and turns it into His history. That is tremendous! Your history, perhaps, could not be poorer than that of the woman of Samaria or that man at the Pool of Bethesda, but He will take hold of it and turn it into the history of Jesus Christ. That is what it amounts to.

Well, that is something to begin with. But another thing I would have you note is what Jesus said to these people. Not only His touch upon their lives, but what He said. You know, dear friends, we have not yet fathomed the depths of what Jesus said to any of these people. That is no exaggeration - it is quite true.

To Nathanael: "Ye shall see the heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man" (John 1:51). Have you fathomed that? Have you exhausted that? I am coming back to that in a moment.

To Nicodemus: Oh, what shall we say about all these things that the Lord Jesus said to Nicodemus? About the work of the Holy Spirit in new birth, the nature of new birth - "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is Spirit" (John 3:6) - and all the other things. And what tremendous things they were! You and I have not exhausted them. I just wonder how many sermons have been preached on John 3:16 in the last two thousand years, and still they are doing it! And it is very rarely that exactly the same thing is said over and over again. There is always something new and something more. Then: "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness..." and so on. Perhaps the profoundest thing that He said to Nicodemus was: "If I told you earthly things and ye believe not, how shall ye believe, if I tell you heavenly things?" (John 3:12). Things beyond the capacity and possibility of the learned man in Israel! That is what it amounts to. Have you fathomed that? Have you got to the bottom of that?

Now, my point is that wealth like that is brought out of a touch with an individual. The hand of the Lord Jesus upon an individual can bring all that out.

And what about this woman of Samaria and the things the Lord Jesus said to her? We are going to see something of that, because we shall be focusing upon that particularly.

And so you go on - and how true it is in the case of Lazarus! For it was out of this episode of Lazarus that there came that mighty statement: "I am the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25). Resurrection and life: not some thing or some happening, but a Person. We have never fathomed that yet! The Church has been drawing upon that for these many centuries, and you and I should be drawing upon it. Some of us have been doing so for many years unto living experience - the Resurrection and the Life as a Person indwelling us, now, here. The rebuke, you notice, was to the sister of Lazarus. She said: "I know that he shall rise again in the resurrection at the last day" (John 11:24). Are you putting it to the future? Are you making it something remote from the present? "I am". There may be a great resurrection day, but for spiritual values resurrection and life are a present experience to be drawn upon every day.

I say that these are wonderful things that the Lord Jesus said to these individuals. I want to make this application because I feel it is quite right to do so. It is not error, not false, and not a mistake to say that the Lord Jesus is making history by His hand being upon us. And if He can get His hand upon us He will draw out spiritual values from these lives which will be for the good of His people. Just as these people were made to produce these values of light and revelation and truth and power for the church for all the ages, so, in a measure and in a sense, the Lord can draw values out of your life and mine for His people, beyond anything that we could produce - but for that hand of God upon us. Have you got hold of that? Is it not helpful? It is encouraging.

Well, when we have said that - and you can see that it is a good field in which to work quite profitably - we come to this particular case of the woman at Samaria to learn something from these words which we have read in John 4.

The Great Contrasts

I want to focus your attention upon these contrasting words: "Neither... nor... but". "Neither in this mountain, nor in Jerusalem... but in spirit and truth." Not this, nor that, but... Not here, nor there, but... That is the heart of things here. Now let us analyse this whole statement. "The hour cometh, and now is." The hour? The hour has arrived. That word 'hour', as you probably know, is used in different ways in the New Testament. It is used literally of the hour of sixty minutes. It is also used in the same way as the word 'day' is used - of a dispensation: "In that day" (John 16:23), referring to some longer period of time than twelve hours. It is a dispensational day. In the same way as 'day' is used figuratively, so the Lord was using here the word 'hour'. "The hour cometh, and now is" - it has arrived. A new dispensational period has come. It is here. Note that.

All this is very much in keeping with the way in which the Lord used this phrase: "In that day", when He was speaking about the coming of the Holy Spirit. The 'hour' and 'day' are identical in the Lord's meaning.

Now, what is this day that had come with the Lord Jesus but the coming of the Lord Jesus Himself? He says it quite emphatically: a new day, or a new hour, has come. We have now entered upon a new period in this world's history. What is it? Of course, as to the actual period, it is undoubtedly from the first advent of the Lord Jesus to His coming again. That is the dispensational new day, or hour, to which the Lord Jesus referred. He was saying, in effect: 'My coming into this world has introduced a new period, a clearly marked-off period, in the history of this world, and that period is bounded by My first coming and My last coming.' That is the day, dispensationally. But that is just a statement of simple fact.

Dear friends, most of the errors, the confusions, the contradictions that abound in Christianity are due largely to the failure to recognize and accept the essential change which has come with this particular dispensation. It is not necessary for me to dwell upon the errors and confusions and contradictions that abound in Christianity. The state of things! Sometimes it appalls us, sometimes it perplexes us, and sometimes it makes us ashamed, this thing called 'Christianity' in general, as we know it. And I repeat: A very large proportion of all that which is a contradiction to Christ is due to the failure to recognize and accept the immense change in dispensation that has come about with the advent of the Lord Jesus. That is a statement which we must follow up.

We used the word 'dispensation'. It is a New Testament word, and is, in itself, illuminating. The Apostle Paul used it four times. It is a Greek word, 'oikos', which means 'the house', and 'oikonomia' is the order of the house, that is, the regime that exists in the house. If yours is a proper house, home, or establishment, there is an order about it. That is, you have a time when you get up in the morning, and, if you are properly ordered, you have a proper time for getting up. You don't get up at any time: you have a certain time. And then you have breakfast at a certain time. That is your order. And then the day in your house is so ordered. This is the way you do it, and if some stranger were to come and begin to interfere, changing your times and ways of doing things, you would, I think, raise a good deal of trouble! You would say: 'Look here, this is not the way we do it here. Please don't interfere with our household arrangements.' You may be more or less jealous about it. Some people, of course, are just careless, but in a careless establishment there are all sorts of difficulties and troubles. You know quite well that it is the well-ordered house, or home, that makes the best progress, gets on with the least friction, and gets the most done, saving the most time.

That is the meaning of this word 'dispensation', or 'oikonomia': the order of the house. With the coming of the Lord Jesus, and of the Holy Spirit, which two things are one in effect and meaning, as we shall see, the order of the house has been changed. The order in the Old Testament was one order, and the order in the New Testament is an entirely different order. The house order, or regime, has been completely changed. I have said that if somebody comes in and begins to change the order in your home there is usually trouble, and that is exactly what happened in the New Testament. Tremendous battles and troubles arose because the Old Testament order was being upset and put aside. Look at it - again and again! Paul's whole life was a battle on this matter. He was the man who used this word 'house order', or 'dispensation' and because he was now recognizing and accepting the setting aside of the whole Mosaic order, the order of the law, and was pointing to the new order that had come in with the Holy Spirit, what a time he had everywhere! His battle for Galatia, for instance, focused upon this very thing - the change in the order from the old to the new. That wonderful Letter to the Hebrews was written on this very thing. There is an order in the Old Testament of angel messengers, of priests, of sacrifices, of covenants, and so on. The writer says: 'That order is finished. A new order has come in with Christ' - "God... hath at the end of these days spoken unto us in his Son" (Hebrews 1:1,2), and this is the new order that has been introduced. A heavenly order, not an earthly one. The old one was earthly, but the new is a heavenly one.

May I repeat, at the risk of tiring you, that it is failure to recognize and accept that that lies right at the root of most of our troubles. There are many people who are still living on a pre-Pentecost basis, trying to live an Old Testament kind of order in a New Testament day, and it does not fit with the Holy Spirit. There are many people who are living on a sub-New Testament basis. altogether below this, and not coming up to the high standard and level of this new order that has come in. There are some people who are trying to combine both, and the result is terrible confusion.

You can leave that if you don't understand and cannot follow what I mean, but it is all an emphasis upon this: the necessity for a recognizing and accepting of this tremendous change that has taken place in the dispensation, in the house order, by the coming of the Lord Jesus and of the Holy Spirit.

The Nature of the New Order

There is no doubt, to come back to this fourth chapter of John, that Jesus was speaking to this woman of Samaria about the day or the hour of this new order. He spoke to her about the water which He would give, about the well which would be opened, and the stream within, about the life which He would give - but it is always with a forward glance and a forward look. He is thinking of that hour when the Holy Spirit would come, and this really did take place. The well was opened within, was it not? The spring welled up within when the Holy Spirit came, and the life was within at that time. He was looking forward to that, just as in chapter 16 He was saying: 'In that day when the Spirit is come.' I repeat, there is no doubt that the Lord was speaking to this woman about what He was calling 'the hour'. He said: 'This has been inaugurated by My coming, but now I am going to tell you what it will be like, what that new hour is like.'

But let us note - and this, dear friends, is the foundation of it all - that this new dispensation, this new order of things, is a spiritual dispensation. That is the thing the Lord has been trying to emphasize. That is what He meant with Nathanael. It was a figurative way of speaking: "Hereafter" - that is, when this hour is come - "ye shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of man" (John 1:51). What is meant by that? Are we to take it literally? We know what it means - that Jesus Christ is the way of communication between heaven and earth, between us and God. That it is by Him, through Him and in Him that heaven and earth are united. We here are united with heaven, and all the communications of God, by the Holy Spirit, with us are in Christ. We understand something of that, don't we? But that requires this new order.

Nicodemus: Is this a new spiritual dispensation? Yes, Nicodemus could not understand it. "How can a man be born when he is old? ...That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." That is the new order. It is a new spiritual regime that is introduced in this hour, this dispensation. It is the dispensation of the Spirit, and, therefore, it is a spiritual dispensation.

And that is what He is saying to this woman. This hour, this dispensational hour, lasting all these centuries, is a spiritual order of things.

You focus, you see, right down on this: 'The hour... neither... nor... but'. 'Our fathers worshipped in this mountain, and they have always said that if you want to meet God you have to come to Mount Gerizim and our Samaritan temple, for that is where you will meet Him. You Jews say: If you want to meet God you must come to the temple in Jerusalem and that is where you will meet Him.' Jesus said: 'Neither... nor' - just wiping out the whole thing. By one sweep of the hand dismissing the whole old order and bringing in an entirely new one and telling you what it is. Yes, it is the new order of the Spirit. And it is not focused locally at all, in the way that you are going to be bound by any localization of this thing, but "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them". That is the new order. In John 3:16 it is: "whosoever believeth", wiping out all racial distinctions, all geographical limitations, all differences here on this earth, with a great 'whosoever': throwing that at Nicodemus, who said: 'No. Israel are the chosen people, the elect, the special people, the spiritual aristocracy. No, no!' ... "Whosoever, Nicodemus!"

That is what came out in Acts 15: "All the nations, upon whom my name is called" - "Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them into the name" - "Gathered together in my name". That is John 3:16 - "Whosoever".

And in Matthew 18:20 it is 'wheresoever'. This is not a matter of geography, of certain structures, edifices, places, kinds of meeting-places, or anything temporal at all. It is nothing of this earth. 'Neither... nor... but in the Spirit.' This is a spiritual dispensation, and everything that belongs to this dispensation is a spiritual thing.

In the Old Testament it was the old house order. If you are going to have a tabernacle it is going to be a temporal, earthly thing, made with hands. If you are going to have priests with their vestments, their beautiful garments, and Levites, and all the system of sacrifices and feasts and orders down here - well; that has gone for ever with the coming of the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit. What is the new house order? Are there going to be people in the Lord's house who minister, serve? Be very careful of how you use that word 'office' - 'holding office' - for in this new order there is nothing official. Everything is spiritual, and everyone who ministers, everyone who serves and everyone who has any place and does anything, does so because they are spiritual men and women, and on no other ground at all. The measure of their spirituality is the measure of their usefulness to the Lord, and nothing else. 'Oh, but in the New Testament' - you say - 'we are told about elders and others. Are we not to recognize that?' Here again I would remind you that in the places where the Apostle Paul speaks most about these things, he is doing it correctively, not provisionally, because things at the end of his life were already taking that ecclesiastical form where they were introducing the kind of system of priesthood that we know so well today in Christianity. It was coming in then at the end of Paul's life. It was not so long after he went from this earth that you have the Book of the Revelation and the messages to the churches, and if the Lord lays Himself out to hit with great force against anything in those letters, it is against formalism. When Paul begins to speak to Timothy about elders in the church, he is saying: 'These men must be spiritual men.' And you see what he calls 'spiritual men'! He is not saying: 'These must be ecclesiastics, and important, religious figures in the religious world.' No, he is saying: 'They must be spiritual men.' He is getting back to the real essence of this whole new order, the House of God, and the real nature of it is spiritual.

The Church and the Churches

That is very important, dear friends. What is the Church, and what are the churches? It is just this - nothing less and nothing more than this: the aggregate of those upon whom the Name has been called whether it be two, or three, or more... 'Where I put My Name, there will I meet you'... "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them". That is the Church: nothing less than that and nothing more than that. 'Neither... nor... but in the Spirit', and wheresoever that happens, there the Church is, in essence, in principle.

There is nothing legal about this at all. It is a spiritual matter entirely. And so everything else to do with this new order is spiritual. That is what the Lord is saying to this woman.

But do you know, dear friends, that in these things that the Lord said to these individuals He was only planting a seed? Here is the seed dropped into the ground. What is the history of that seed? If it is a normal history it will not come back as a single seed, but in a multiplication of seeds. From that one there will be many, it may be a whole host. The Lord Jesus dropped the seed principle into these individual lives, and the rest of the New Testament is the development of that seed. What I mean is this: Here you

have something in germ form, and in the rest of the New Testament you have all the meaning in that developing, and you can trace from the later part all the enlarged teaching and revelation... 'Oh, this is what the Lord said!'

The Heavens Opened

I have pointed this out with Nathanael... "the heaven opened". Oh, what a wonderful thing it is for you and for me, dear friends, that through Calvary heaven is opened to us! I don't mean that we are going to heaven. That is quite all right and true, but now, here in this place, we have an open heaven. There is a way through. The communication is going on in Christ because He is here, the great Ladder - if I may say so - between heaven and earth, between God and us, the communication of the Spirit is going on with us in this very place. We can be here all night under an opened heaven, with the blessed communications of the Spirit to our hearts, because heaven is no longer closed against us. Calvary has rent the heaven for us. Just as the veil of the temple was rent from top to bottom when Jesus died, so the way is opened into the Most Holy for us now.

I repeat: We say these things, but what an immensity there is in a simple thing said to Nathanael! Something that you did not quite understand, but you come into spiritual life and you know what it means to have an opened heaven... Do you? Do you know what personal communication from heaven into your heart means? Do you know what personal communication direct with heaven from your heart means? Why, that is the birthright of the child of God! That is why it is the first thing in the Gospel by John, for an opened heaven is the first thing that a child of God comes into. And that heaven, as in Christ, is for us, because of the rent heaven. But you want all the rest of the New Testament to explain that, and that is what it does.

It is the same with the words to Nicodemus, and to this woman, and to all the others who are here. It was put in a simple, symbolic way to these people by the Lord Jesus, but though He puts these things in that way, He never reduces them to anything less than the eternal measure of value and meaning. When the Lord Jesus said something, there was vastly more in what He said than anyone ever recognized at the time. I give you a simple example. We are perhaps more familiar with what is called the parable of the Prodigal Son than with any other story in the Bible. Take a fragment from that. The Lord Jesus is telling this story, using this illustration about this son, his father and his home, and when at last He gets that son to the point of returning home to the father, what is it that the Lord Jesus puts into the mouth of that son? Note: it is only a part of the whole, but it is a very interesting and significant part... "Father, I have sinned against heaven, and in thy sight" (Luke 15:21). What might He have made him say if He had just been talking in an ordinary man's language? 'Father, I made a mistake and did wrong. I have suffered for it and have had a miserable time, and I have lost everything. Have pity on me!' That is not good enough for God! Sin is sin, and sin is against heaven, and sin is something before God. Jesus never confused and confounded these great principles by just reducing them to a human story. "I have sinned" - and sin is against heaven, an affront and an offence to heaven, and sin is against God, an insult to God. He made the son say that, and do you see what I mean? When the Lord Jesus says something, it sounds very simple, but there is the profundity of eternity in anything that He says.

And so He said to this woman: "Neither... nor... but" - and in that 'but' there is the whole dispensation in spirit and in truth, and the whole nature of this new order. The whole nature of the Church, of all the Church's functions and service and everything, is - what? It is a spiritual order, and we will only get into terrible confusion, spoil everything, and make any amount of trouble if we try to bring this down to some

earthly thing, earthly system, earthly order, some (as brother Nee used to say) earth touch. It is death. That is the explanation. Keep everything in the Spirit and out of touch with this accursed world, and there is life, there is progress, and there is growth.

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/t-austin-sparks/neither-nor-but/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net