

The Essential Seal and Constitution of the Christian Life

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Christian life is founded on the essential seal and constitution of the Holy Spirit, which brings about union with Christ, order and fruitfulness, revelation of man's destiny, and new consciousness and capacities.

Scripture: Acts 18:24

Topics: "The Holy Spirit", "Discipleship"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the critical role of the Holy Spirit in the Christian life, asserting that the presence of the Holy Spirit is essential for true belief and union with Christ. He explores the significance of being 'sealed' by the Holy Spirit, which marks the believer's identity and transformation into a new creation. The sermon highlights the foundational moment of the Ephesus church, where Paul inquires if the disciples received the Holy Spirit upon believing, revealing a gap in their understanding and experience of faith. Sparks illustrates that true discipleship involves not just knowledge of Scripture but a personal encounter with the Holy Spirit, which empowers and enriches the believer's life. Ultimately, he concludes that the indwelling of the Holy Spirit constitutes believers as supernatural beings, capable of living out their faith in a transformative way.

Transcript

Reading: Acts 18:24-19:6a.

"Did ye receive the Holy Spirit when ye believed?"

Let it be said at once that we are not here attempting to expound the person and work of the Holy Spirit, but are seeking to emphasize the importance of the Holy Spirit's personal presence within believers.

The Terms Explained

First let us examine the terms that we are employing in our sub-title, 'The Essential Seal and Constitution of the Christian Life'.

When we use the word 'essential', we are thinking of such a statement as that made by the apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans: "If any man hath not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his" (Rom. 8:9). This clearly indicates that the possession of the Holy Spirit is essential and indispensable to the Christian life.

Then, when we go on to speak of the 'seal', we think of other words such as those used by Paul in his letter to the Ephesians: "Having... believed, ye were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise" (Eph. 1:13). Note that it was the Ephesians to whom was originally put the question: "Did ye receive the Holy Spirit when ye believed?" Upon their testimony of faith, they did receive the Holy Spirit, and, years afterward, the Apostle wrote to them the words that we have just quoted. The word 'sealed' implies 'putting the seal upon a transaction': something quite certain, quite precise, belonging to a moment; a definite act - "ye were sealed with the Holy Spirit".

And then when we go further and speak of the 'constitution' of the Christian life as by the Holy Spirit, we think of such words as those used by the Lord Jesus Himself to Nicodemus: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6): indicating a definite, distinct, different kind of person, one with a different constitution, a person who is constituted in a different way. "That which is born of the Spirit" is different from "that which is born of the flesh". One is flesh, the other is spirit.

Many other Scriptures could be added to these to explain and define our sub-title.

Initial Reception of the Holy Spirit

Now when we come to the passage which we have read, and from which I have taken the question that is placed at the head of this chapter, we find an incident with several features of very great importance. I think we shall see, as we proceed, that this is something of great significance. But first we must translate it correctly. It may be that you have in your hand the old Authorized (or King James) Version. That is very good, but it is not always correct in the sense of being up-to-date. That version reads: "Have ye received the Holy Ghost since ye believed?" Now, the word here in the original text does not mean 'subsequent to your believing'. It does not mean: 'Did you, at some subsequent time after you believed, receive the Holy Spirit?' The Revised Version corrects the translation and says: "Did ye receive the Holy Spirit when ye believed?" And that is correct, and true to the whole teaching and meaning of the New Testament. The point is that believers in the Lord Jesus Christ are supposed to receive the Holy Spirit at the time when they believe, when they definitely exercise saving faith in Him.

(a) What the Passage Records:

The Foundation of a Great Church and of Great Ministries

The importance of this incident is seen in two aspects. Firstly, you note that this is the beginning of a great church - the church at Ephesus. Little need be said, to those who are familiar with the New Testament, by way of emphasizing or proving the importance of the church at Ephesus. It was to that church, as to one of a circle, that the Apostle Paul wrote the greatest document in the history of the world. That is not exaggerating at all. The greatest document that has ever been written is Paul's letter 'to the Ephesians' so-called. It was probably a circular letter to a number of churches, of which Ephesus was one. But no greater letter or document exists. I invite you to investigate it and see if you can exhaust it. It will take you back into eternity past; it will take you through the outworking of the counsels of God through the ages; and it will take you right on into "the ages of the ages", showing you God at work in Heaven, in earth and in Hell, in the whole universe: a mighty, mighty document, written to the church that we see here in our passage coming into being.

Note, then, the place of the Holy Spirit in the foundations. How careful the Apostle was to make sure that the beginning was right, that the foundation was sound! It was going to have to carry an immense

superstructure, and it must be trustworthy. Hence to the nucleus of that great church - perhaps only twelve disciples - he puts the question: "Did ye receive the Holy Spirit when ye believed?" Think of the ministry of the Apostle Paul subsequent to this question. For three years he tarried at Ephesus, and at his final interview with the elders or leaders of that church, during the course of his last journey before his imprisonment, he was able to say to them, in retrospect: "I shrank not from declaring unto you the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27). For three years, such a man as this was giving out all that he then could give of his knowledge of the Divine counsels.

Here was a church being founded and formed for tremendous purposes and with tremendous capacity. What spiritual capacity it requires to be a church like that - to be able to take all that an apostle such as Paul could give! That is a very testing thing. Those who minister in the Word of God, and in the Holy Spirit, know very well the capacity of their hearers by the liberty that they have to give the message. Sometimes they find themselves limited because their hearers cannot take more. They may not know the people, but they are conscious of the limitation. At other times they find themselves completely released, able without any difficulty to give all that they have. They are moving in the Spirit, and those to whom they minister have capacity.

Now these people at Ephesus had capacity. In those three years they could receive "the whole counsel of God", and later they could receive this matchless letter which the Apostle wrote from his prison. A church with such capacity - and, let me add, Christians with such capacity - must know in a very real way what it means to receive the Holy Spirit. The receiving of the Holy Spirit is the beginning, the foundation, of all the work of building and enlarging.

Paul's ministry was a great ministry here, amongst these believers. Let us recall that Timothy, also, was a minister of the church at Ephesus, and that his ministry was enriched, constituted, inspired, instructed, by Paul himself. Paul was able to say that Timothy had followed his teaching and conduct (2 Tim. 3:10). Yes, Timothy had been in close association with the Apostle, for a long time and over a wide area, and he ministered at Ephesus. And then we remember that the great Apostle John was an elder of the church at Ephesus. What wealth John has given us, in Gospel, Letters and Revelation! What a church this was! What a church it became from these twelve believers! And it all sprang out of the receiving of the Holy Spirit. I commend to you a study of the place of the Holy Spirit in the letter to the Ephesians. He has a very large place in the letter from beginning to end.

(b) What the Passage Teaches

The first aspect of the significance of our passage, then, is the church itself and the ministries that were fulfilled in it. Let us now come to the second aspect - namely, that which the passage teaches. You notice that it can be divided into three sections. The middle section is the Holy Spirit: that is central, that is the focal point of everything. Then on the one side of that you have a section circling around the word 'disciples' - "Paul... found certain disciples" - and on the other side a section circling around the word 'baptism'. You have the Holy Spirit in the centre: then, on the one side disciples, on the other side baptism.

(1) The Work of the Holy Spirit

We must recognise, first of all, that Paul's question concerning the Holy Spirit must have had a good reason. I do not think it was just a casual or formal question - that Paul arrived there and in a quite casual way, without any special point or object, put this question to these people: "Did ye receive the Holy Spirit when ye believed?" We are bound to believe that Paul had a reason, and a very good reason, for asking

the question. We are left, of course, to surmise, to conjecture, but the issue of the question shows that Paul had discerned something. He had detected in these disciples some lack. And his discernment enabled him to put his finger right on the spot, as we say.

Now, when Paul puts a question like that, we have to bring to it all that Paul would have brought concerning the Holy Spirit. We should need to go to all his writings, and to his own personal experience, and gather up, if we could, all that Paul knew and all that Paul had experienced as to the place, the work and the importance of the Holy Spirit. And that was no small thing! Paul has set forth what he knew about the Holy Spirit from many different aspects.

(a) Union with Christ

To begin with, Paul has made it clear that without the Holy Spirit there is no union with Christ. Union with Christ is the very heart of Christianity: it is the great, great theme of Paul; and union with Christ is the work of the Holy Spirit. To quote one of his own fragments: "He that is joined unto the Lord is one spirit" (1 Cor. 6:17). All that Paul knew and had experienced about the Holy Spirit focused upon this great matter of union with Christ, and he brought all that into his question. The question could have been put in other ways. Paul could have raised directly the fundamental question of union with Christ. Or he could have spoken of the new creation: Paul has a good deal to say, both directly and by inference, as to a new creation in Christ Jesus. And from these and many other suggestions and indications, we see that Paul thought of the Christian life as a kind of spiritual counterpart to the material creation. He said: "God, that said, Light shall shine out of darkness... shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). He saw this as the counterpart of the creational act, or Divine fiat, "Let there be light". The spiritual counterpart has taken place in us. In another place you will find that Paul brings in the Holy Spirit in that connection. He changes his metaphor, but keeps to his truth: God has written in our hearts, not with pen and ink, but by the Spirit of the living God (2 Cor. 3:3).

(b) Order and Fruitfulness

Paul has many other allusions to the creation, as he takes it over into the spiritual life. What a lot he made of the power of the Word of God in the life - creative power in the life of the believer! How much he has given us concerning order as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit! At the beginning of the Bible we see order developing or emerging out of the chaos and disruption, under the influence of the brooding Spirit. Now, in the spiritual life, under the influence and power of the Spirit of God in this new creation, the same thing is taking place: a new order is emerging in the life of the believer. And as, out of the barren desolation in which the earth is found at the beginning of the Bible, fruitfulness emerges and develops, so is it, Paul teaches, with the fruit of the Spirit in the life of the believer. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, selfcontrol" (Gal. 5:22,23). Instead of the barrenness of the unbeliever's life, there comes this fruitfulness. It is a work of new creation by the Holy Spirit. And as at the beginning in the material creation we see a progressive development and growth, so Paul has much to say to us about growth and progressiveness under the government of the Spirit of God. A life governed and led by the Spirit is one that goes on developing, growing, increasing in Christ. In a life in which the Holy Spirit is having His way there is no stagnation. Such a life is not the same today as it was a year ago - that would be all wrong. The progressive factor in the new creation, as a part of the work of the Holy Spirit, is made very clear by the Apostle.

(c) Revelation of Man's Destiny

How profoundly and how fully does Paul teach concerning the purpose and the destiny of man! At the beginning of the Bible we have hints that God created man with a great purpose and a great destiny, but Paul divulges it all. He tells us exactly what was in God's thought before He created man or the world - what He intended in creating man - what the destiny of man was to be. All this comes out through Paul. How is this possible? Because the Holy Spirit Himself has revealed it to Paul, and then Paul, by the Holy Spirit, has been enabled to reveal it to us. And by the same Spirit this great Divine work of a new creation is to be carried on to its final fulness. The last thing in the material creation was: "And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31). God entered into His rest. That is the crowning work of the Holy Spirit: bringing everything ultimately to the pleasure and satisfaction of God - not only bringing God into His rest, but bringing God's rest into His creation.

(d) New Consciousness and Capacities

Paul goes on to say much about the new consciousness of the new-creation man and woman. An entirely new consciousness is given to the believer who receives the Holy Spirit. All that of which such a one was entirely unconscious, now breaks forth into consciousness and becomes the most living reality in the believer's life - such as the consciousness of God as Father, the consciousness of Christ as Saviour, and many other sides and aspects. Every believer who has received the Holy Spirit knows how true this is. There is a new awareness in every realm; there are new capacities for doing and for being what was entirely impossible before. All this relates to the spiritual counterpart of the creation - the new creation that is in Christ Jesus; and it is all accomplished by the indwelling Holy Spirit, just as the material creation was effected by the pervading and brooding Spirit of God.

(e) The Teaching of Jesus

Let us remember, furthermore, that Paul was an inheritor of what Jesus had said regarding the Holy Spirit. Now Jesus had said very much about this matter. At the end of His life here on this earth, the Lord Jesus had taken many hours, apart from the world, apart from the multitudes, to be alone with His disciples. And through those many hours there was one thing about which He was speaking, in one way or another, almost continuously. There was one phrase that was constantly on His lips. "In that day...", He said, "in that day..."; and when you look to see what "that day" was, you find that He was saying: "When he, the Spirit... is come" (John 16:13) - He shall do this and that. It was the coming day of the Spirit. All that Jesus had said about that day, and about what the Spirit would do when He came, Paul had come into, had inherited. Paul had come to know - what the apostles had dreaded, until they knew it - the truth of Jesus' words: "It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you" (John 16:7). Yes, the disciples dreaded His going, but they lived to prove that it was, as He had said, a far, far greater thing for the Spirit to come than for Jesus to remain in the body. Paul had come into the reality of that - into the superior greatness of the Spirit's presence even to the physical presence of the Lord Jesus.

Now Paul knew all that by experience, and he therefore brought all this knowledge, this spiritual knowledge, into the question that he put to them. And how the question grows! What a tremendous question it becomes if it implies all that! All that Jesus taught and meant about the day of the Holy Spirit; all that that same Spirit had done in fulfilling the very words of the Lord Jesus: "He shall guide you into all the truth... He shall take of mine, and shall declare it unto you" (John 16:13,14) - all that had come to Paul. What a wealth we have in Paul's letters about the Holy Spirit! And all that comes into this question: "Did ye receive the Holy Spirit when ye believed?" It is a very big question! Viewed in that light, I doubt whether

there is a greater question. What a difference it should make to the Christian life if it is all true!

Let me sum it all up by saying this: The Christian, the believer, who has really received the Holy Spirit, is a supernatural being. The indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, and His imparting of eternal life, constitute the believer a supernatural being, a being who has something within of a supernatural character, distinguishing him from all others. It is a deathless life. To receive eternal life means that there is that within which transcends the natural order, making the recipient an eternal being, in the Divine sense, linked with Heaven and linked with eternity. And the Church in which this is true, which has truly received and is indwelt by the Holy Spirit, is a supernatural Body; there is no power in this universe which can destroy it. History has proved that and will prove it to the end. Let men and devils combine against this Church: no matter - it will remain; it is supernatural.

(2) Disciples

In the second Place, we find 'disciples' mentioned here. "Paul... found certain disciples". They would no doubt have been people who were bearing the name 'Christian': they would have classed themselves as such and would probably have been referred to as Christians. And yet they were people who, while being called disciples, were yet without the fundamental essential of the Christian life. What were they? I think the answer is to be found in Apollos, the Jew from Alexandria, who had recently arrived in Ephesus and had previously come into touch with the ministry of John the Baptist concerning Jesus. We are told here that he had been 'instructed by word of mouth' [katecheo] (Acts 18:25). Now, what was John's vocation? John's vocation was to prepare the way of the Lord, to lead on and point on to Jesus. What was John's message? Repentance in view of the imminent coming of the Messiah. 'Repent!', said John. But John had definite limitations. Said he: "I... baptize you in water... he that cometh after me... shall baptize you in the Holy Spirit". (Matt. 3:2,11 A.S.V.) That represents a very great difference.

Now Apollos had got all that, and probably some extra teaching about Jesus, apparently at second hand ('by word of mouth'). In the main, Apollos ended where John ended: that is, he was without a personal experience of the work of the Holy Spirit through baptism into Jesus Christ. He had, nevertheless, some particular values on the positive side. We are told that he was "mighty in the scriptures" (Acts 18:24): which I take to mean that he had an unusually wide and deep knowledge of the Old Testament Scriptures about the coming Messiah - what we call the 'Messianic Scriptures' - all of which pointed toward the Christ; all of which rang out the note of preparation, and especially of repentance, for the Christ was coming. John baptized with a baptism of repentance in preparation for the Christ and His kingdom: but there he stopped and could do no more. And Apollos seems to have stopped there too. Perhaps he was a mightier man in the Old Testament Scriptures than even John the Baptist, but with all his knowledge of the Scriptures he fell short of the experience of the Holy Spirit. And therefore, according to the law of ministry, he could not lead these disciples further than he himself had gone.

But Aquila and Priscilla, that fine Christian couple who had accompanied Paul to Ephesus from Corinth, soon detected the flaw and the lack, and took him and expounded to him the way of God more carefully (vs. 26b). His ministry enlarged greatly after that. Soon afterwards he left Ephesus and crossed over to Corinth, and it is interesting to follow the wonderful ministry of Apollos from this point. But I just mention it for this reason: that when Apollos got beyond John the Baptist to the real meaning of the Holy Spirit and of baptism into Christ, it made an immense difference to his ministry. Paul was able to say: "I planted, Apollos watered" (1 Cor. 3:6), and much more. That is no small thing. It illustrates the vital importance of having the Holy Spirit. Now these disciples knew nothing about the Holy Spirit. Although they had dwelling

in their midst a man mighty in the Old Testament Scriptures, and familiar with the teaching of John the Baptist and his baptism, they could not be led any further by him. They knew nothing vital concerning the way of the Lord, although such a man had been ministering to them.

These disciples, then, represented a kind of parenthesis, an interlude, a discontinuity; something held in suspense, as it were, between John the Baptist and Jesus. And I am not sure that there are not many such disciples today, suspended in that gap. Yes, they know something of the Bible; they know something about Jesus. They have been 'taught by word of mouth'. But I fear there are multitudes of those who have the name 'Christian', and who would be called, or would wish to be called, disciples, who have no real, personal experience of receiving the Holy Spirit. They belong to this kind of parenthetical Christianity. It has not gone through, not gone right on; it has stopped, it is a discontinuity. But these at Ephesus did go on, as the record shows us - they did bridge the gap.

(3) Baptism

We now turn briefly to the third matter - that of baptism. For it was up to that that the Apostle led them. From their reply, "We did not so much as hear whether the Holy Spirit was", we are not quite sure whether they meant that they had not heard that there was such a thing or person as the Holy Spirit, or that they had not heard whether the Holy Spirit had come. But it is not of great importance. It is perfectly evident that they knew nothing about the Holy Spirit. And so Paul says, 'Well, then, into what were you baptized?' That is the point upon which the big question turns. "Did ye receive the Holy Spirit when ye believed? ...Into what then were ye baptized?" These two things go together; the one question is within the other - the one resolves itself into the other. "Into what... were ye baptized?"

What, then, we have to ask, did baptism into Christ mean? To put it in another form: Why did the Holy Spirit wait for that testimony? And in answering this question we touch the greatest things in the Christian life. Here we really do come to the 'seal' and the 'constitution' mentioned in our title. I do not mean that baptism is that, but look behind it and see what it really meant. You have to go a long way back to answer the question, What did baptism into Christ mean? You have to go right back to the beginning. What was it that happened in the garden, when man disbelieved God? When man, at the suggestion of Satan, disobeyed God, he opened as it were a door into his own being - a door into which Satan put his foot, and from which he has never withdrawn it. Through man opening himself to Satan, Satan got a purchase in man's soul, obtained a foothold in the very heart of man, upon which all the evil powers have fulfilled the work of Satan in man and through man ever since.

Make no mistake about this: the soul of the unregenerate man and woman is in alliance with the evil powers. It is not a matter of how conscious you are of it. Try to get away and turn to the Lord Jesus, and you will become aware that you are not as free as you thought you were, you have not the ability that you thought you had. You will wake up to the fact that you are a prisoner, and that, unless a mighty deliverer and rescuer comes to you, there is no escape. That foothold was given; that alliance and link with Satan was formed; and it remains. The soul of the unregenerate is linked with Satan, and the evil powers fulfil all the purposes of Satan in the life.

What is the way out? The only way out is through death. God pronounced that upon man. "In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die" (Gen. 2:17). "The soul that sinneth, it shall die" (Ezek. 18:4). But "one died for all" (2 Cor. 5:14). Jesus took the place of the sinner, and died that death; and in His death He broke that link, He severed that union: He stripped off the principalities (Col. 2:5); He 'nullified him that had

the power of death, that is, the devil' (Heb. 2:14b). One died for all. Baptism is our testimony, the believer's testimony to the double fact that, in the death of Christ, the man in union with Satan has been removed and Satan with him, and that, in resurrection-union with Christ, the Holy Spirit constitutes inwardly a new relationship. Death is the great divide. Resurrection is the great new union. Through this new link or union, Christ and His Kingdom operate. All the purposes of God are realised - but only realised through and upon the ground of this union effected by receiving the Holy Spirit.

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