

# The Great Divide and the Great Transition

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The sermon emphasizes the critical divide between the Old and New Testaments, centered on the transformative power of the Cross of Jesus Christ.*

**Scripture:** John 1:12

**Topics:** "New Birth", "The Cross"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the significant divide between the Old and New Testaments, illustrating how Christianity has evolved over time, often losing its original essence. He highlights the Cross of Jesus Christ as the pivotal point that transitions from the old covenant to the new, marking a clear distinction in God's relationship with humanity. The sermon stresses the importance of understanding this divide to grasp the true nature of Christianity, which is encapsulated in the concepts of 'Not' and 'But'--representing the end of the old ways and the beginning of a new divine economy. Sparks urges believers to recognize their identity as children of God, born not of human will but through divine action, thus establishing a new humanity. This understanding is crucial for overcoming the confusion and weakness prevalent in Christendom today.

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## Transcript

Among the games that used to be played at parties there was one like this. A large circle was formed by the company present, and then someone began by whispering something to the next person. This was passed on right round the circle. The last person of the ring then had to say aloud what he or she had received, or thought they had received. It was then compared with the original statement, and it was both amusing and amazing how the thing had developed, lost its character, both by addition, subtraction, or distortion. Often the original could only with difficulty be recognised.

While Christianity is not a game, it has greatly suffered in this way as it has passed down the generations through the minds and lips of its vast circle of sponsors and adherents. So much so that it is very difficult to recognise the origin in what has emerged in course of time. It therefore becomes necessary and of very great importance to both ask and seek to answer the question: What is it that we have come into in Christianity? The object of these messages will be just to do that as ability may be given by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of TRUTH.

We shall begin on a wide basis and work from the circumference to the centre. We know that the Bible is divided into two main parts, or sections, the Old and the New Testaments. That is not just a literary

division. It is truly a historical division, but it is much - very much - more than that. Upon the difference represented by that division hangs everything that God has said, and wants us to know as to His eternal intention. It is just there between the two Testaments, or halves, of the Bible that the immense significance of our above title stands - the Great Divide and the Great Transition. As we proceed, we shall shortly come to point out that in that gap between the Testaments stands nothing less than the Cross of Jesus Christ.

The first section of the New Testament is that which comprises the four "Gospels". Whatever differences in likeness, context, presence and absences there may be in the four, they all certainly have this in common: they all lead up to the one climax, the Cross of Christ. All that each has contained is shown to be steadily and inexorably moving toward the Cross. From what we learn later we understand that the Cross was fixed in the counsels of God according to His foreknowledge from the foundation of the world. What, then, do we conclude from this climax of the Gospels, the very first section of the New Testament? The Gospels introduce the great Person of Jesus Christ. They proceed with His works and His teaching, substantiated by His life or character. All this comprises His mission, which mission is to reveal God and God's purpose for man. The place of the Cross as the inevitable and fixed climax to the Gospels says one tremendous thing: it is that all that revelation of God, in life, work, and teaching, can only be made good for, and be entered into by man through, the Cross of Jesus Christ, God's beloved Son. We ought to place many marks of emphasis and exclamation at the end of that statement. Read it again!

That, then, clearly and surely says that the Cross stands right at the beginning of the New Testament, and that again means that it stands between the two. If we just put the figure of a cross there we shall see that its arms stretch backward and forward. Then we should draw a strong line right down the centre of the Cross. By this figure we are enabled to understand the whole teaching of the New Testament, or, in other words,

#### THE TRUE MEANING AND NATURE OF CHRISTIANITY

That arm with the backward aspect - up to the central line - says FINISH, AN END. The arm with the forward aspect says ALL THINGS NEW (i.e. different). On one side the Cross is the closing of a door upon one whole historic system RELATED TO GOD. On the other side the Cross - in the resurrection of Christ - proclaims an open door to an entirely new Divine economy. One side says 'No! positively No!' The other side says 'Yes! definitely Yes!'

Of course, what remains is for us to understand what it is to which the No and the Yes apply. That will follow. For the present we have to come to realise the inclusive and emphatic FACT that there is a point in the history of God's order at which there is an immense dispensational divide and transition. We do not hesitate to say that the confusion, weakness, frustration, and failure which so much characterises Christendom is very largely due to failure to realise, be really alive and understanding as to this divide and transition! There is a very real and true sense in which the New Testament is entirely occupied with the business of making this divide and transition clear. This will become evident as we proceed. It can be rightly said that the New Testament is built on two aspects expressed in two words, the occurrence of which demands a lot of close study or tracing. Both by actual use and by clear implication these two words and aspects are numerous. These two words - set over against each other - are "Not" and "But". They respectively cover and embody two comprehensive and entirely different systems in the Divine economy, that is, in God's methods with man, and the means employed by Him. They divide the two main dispensations. All the main works of God are included in those affords. As to his works and ways up to the Cross the great "Not" applies. It says: 'Not SO any longer.'

We shall at once proceed to note some of the main points upon which the great divide and the great transition rest. The first of these is:

#### THE NO AND THE YES OF HUMANITY

The fundamental statement is in John 1:12-13: "Children of God... born, Not... but of God." This is enlarged upon in chapter 3:3-12, and it runs in close connection with all that is in this Gospel. It is pursued along many lines, as we shall see. But before we follow this, may we be reminded of one helpful matter. When John wrote this Gospel he was an old man, probably very old. At the end - or near the end - of his life he had been exiled and imprisoned on the Isle of Patmos; for exactly how long we do not know, but the point is that, with all of his personal, intimate knowledge of the Lord Jesus, His teaching, works, character, death, resurrection, ascension, and the advent of the Holy Spirit, he had much time for quiet detached meditation and thought. His Gospel is the product of this, therefore every word and statement is heavily loaded with much consideration and communion with the Lord. We take it all as just written statements, but we really should give something of the same meditation to even the words employed by John; for, as we have said, they are laden with eternal meaning.

Having said that, we return to the point at which we put in that parenthesis. The "not" and the "but" in its first application to mankind is pursued along various lines. Those lines are:

- (a) The title of the Son of God which is FOUNDATIONAL to all that follows in this connection.
- (b) The words which most conspicuously characterise this Gospel.
- (c) The "SIGNS" which John selected, or was led to select, to illustrate and demonstrate the particular object in view.

We begin with

#### THE TITLE OF THE SON OF GOD

"In the beginning was the WORD."

"The WORD was with God."

"The WORD was God."

"The WORD became flesh." (John 1:1,14)

It is not at all necessary to enter the tortuous jungle of Greek philosophical and mystical thought which is associated with this word "Logos". Whatever help there may be in its elucidation, let the scholars dig that out. The simple facts are that it just means this IN THE BIBLE. A word is the means of expressing something that is in the mind, a thought expressed. Then (in this connection) it is the mind or thought of God. The next element in the word is that it is not abstract, but an act. God's word in the Old Testament is God's act, it is a fiat. "In the beginning God said... and it WAS." "He spake, and it was DONE", etc., etc.

The next thing here is that the mind, the thought, the expression thereof took PERSONAL form: "Became flesh." The result - and note how this connects with our present application of the divide and transition - is that we have in Christ the personal expression of the mind of God as to humanity; a kind of manhood! A NEW kind of humanity; not only a better, but a different from all other. This is THE great significance of the

Incarnation, a FUNDAMENTAL difference. Humanity, yes; but different. Not in bodily or physical appearance. Not in all human SOUL-sensibilities and endowments; but deeper than body and soul, a spirit begotten of God. "The (or an) ONLY begotten of the Father" (John 1:14). The "only" is unique. This is an unique humanity, not only an improved specimen. The difference is in what follows, as we shall see.

So, the first meaning of the "Not" and the "But" relates to the title given to the Son of God who became "Son of Man"; that is, a different and unique human emanation and expression of God's mind; an act of God. From there we proceed along the line of

#### THE DOMINANT WORDS USED BY JOHN

They are quite a cluster, but for our immediate purpose we note these: "Father", "Son", "Life", "Light", "Truth", "To know", "Believe", "Love".

"Father" occurs 116 times in this Gospel, MORE THAN ANY OTHER WORD. It is therefore the background of all that is here. The very term implies begetting; emanation of those of like nature.

John was particularly dominated by this conception of God. In his Letters as well as here he says much about being begotten of God. The children of God are God's act and their existence is the projecting of His WILL! While they are the children of His love, they are not of impulse, but calculated and preconsidered. The whole conception of humanity was in the mind of God before creation, humanity that now is. The Word - "God manifest in the flesh" is the "But" over against the "Not" in this respect. If Christ's mission was - in the first place - to reveal the Father, as it certainly was, then the Father is revealed in human form in His children; initially, progressively, and ultimately in all likeness, as John says in his Letter. It is a NATURE that we refer to, not His deity. We do not partake of THAT! It will be of great value to the reader if he will trace this word "Father" through John, AND STOP TO THINK in each case.

From the "Father" we proceed to the "Children" (John 1:12).

First, the fact is stated that Jesus gave it to some to be children of God, and that He did this precisely on the basis of receiving Him. Weigh that carefully!

Then it says that this relationship to God is a given "right", prerogative, authority: "He gave (them) the authority to become the children of God." The word is 'exousia' and it has a legal meaning. It is the rightful, legal, legitimate, authoritative status of true children. These children inherit rights and claims by their birth. (See all the New Testament teaching on "heirs of God, joint-heirs with Jesus Christ"; the "Inheritance", etc.)

From there we are led on to the nature of this humanity, these "children". It is here that the first categorical "Not" "But" connects. The great divide, the great contrast is so emphasised. "Which were born (begotten)": Not -

- (a) "Of bloods" (plural),
- (b) "The will of the flesh,"
- (c) "The will of man."

"Bloods" in the plural seems to mean the mingling of sexes, and there may very well be a hidden reference to the birth of Jesus which was not the mingling of the blood of Joseph and Mary, but "of God". "The will of

the flesh", according to later New Testament teaching (e.g. Romans 8:4-8, etc.) is the choice, the decision, the energy of the natural man. So, "not of the will [volition] of man".

This is a tremendous and categorical sweeping away of everything but God's act in new birth. What an 'everything' that is in Christianity! "But of [out from] God." Every TRUE child of God can say: 'I am God's act in the deepest reality of my being.' Not by natural birth from earthly (even Christian) parents. Not by the force or strength of any man's will, but God did it! "Not" "But". There is a divide in the race, a difference in the humanities.

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