

The Heavenly Man as the Instrument of the Eternal Purpose

by T. Austin-Sparks

The Heavenly Man, Christ, is the model for the Church, and the Church is to be born anew, or from above, through the Word of God and the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: Genesis 12:3, Genesis 21:12, Luke 10:25, John 1:1-3, Acts 19:2, 1 John 5:11-12

Topics: "Eternal Life", "Union with Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the dual nature of Christ as both the personal and corporate Heavenly Man, revealing how the Church, though incomplete in time, is viewed by God as perfect in eternity. He explains that Christ's incarnation and redemption are pivotal for restoring humanity's relationship with God, allowing believers to transcend the present evil age and access eternal life. Sparks highlights the necessity of being born anew through the Word and the Holy Spirit, which enables believers to embody the life of Christ and fulfill their heavenly calling. He draws parallels between the birth of Christ and the spiritual birth of the Church, underscoring the importance of union with Christ for receiving the Holy Spirit and living out a heavenly life. Ultimately, he calls for a ministry that flows from the indwelling life of Christ rather than mere titles or systems.

Transcript

The Heavenly Man personally is presented to us by the Apostle John in a fuller way than by any other of the New Testament writers. Paul advances to the corporate Heavenly Man. That does not mean that Paul does not present the personal Heavenly Man, for he undoubtedly does, particularly in his letter to the Colossians; but he advances from the personal Heavenly Man to the corporate Heavenly Man, which is the Church, His Body.

May we repeat one thing. Christ, actually and literally, was with the Father before times eternal, and the Church, not actually and literally, but in fore-knowledge and fore-ordination, was also with the Father and the Son before times eternal. The fullest unveiling of the Church, which comes to us through the Apostle Paul, reveals it as already complete, but we know it to be a fact that it was in no sense completed when Paul wrote. It was not finished numerically and it was anything but finished spiritually and morally, yet he speaks of it as though it were the most complete, the most perfect thing in the universe. He is standing, as it were, at God's side, and God views the Church from the eternal standpoint, that is, as outside of time.

The Restoration of Heavenly Relationship

Recognizing, then, that Christ and the Church are revealed as being with the Father from all eternity, we next see that by reason of that which has taken place in the fall, and which was anticipated in the redemptive line of purpose, Christ comes into time, and is born in time in relation to redemption, and that redemption is said to be from "this present evil age." The Authorized Version renders it "world," but the change is important. It is not from a place that we are redeemed, but from an age, and it is perfectly clear what that age is. It embraces all the intermediary sections or dispensations. The present evil age runs from Adam to the new heavens and the new earth. There is a coming glorious age. To be redeemed out of this present evil age, means that the Church, which belongs to eternity and not to this age, is to be redeemed out of it. It shows how Christ, by redemption, brings back into the straight line of what is eternal and outside of time, into the eternal counsels and purposes of God concerning His Son. By the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, which is a redemption from this evil age, the Church is redeemed unto that other age, that eternal age. So the birth of Christ is related to the redemption of the purchased possession, the redemption of the Church.

Coming to John, firstly with regard to Christ's entry into time, we find that John has three things to say about Christ.

(1) John sets Christ in eternity.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). That is Christ outside of time.

(2) He shows Christ's coming into time.

"And the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us..." (John 1:14).

(3) Christ is revealed as being also in heaven while here.

This third thing which is stated in John's Gospel is declared by the Lord Himself, and combines both of the other two things. The Son, Who is here in the flesh, is at the same time in heaven. There is the uniting of the two spheres. While He is here, He is still in heaven; while He is in time, He is still in eternity. "No man hath ascended into heaven, but He that descended out of heaven, even the Son of Man, which is in heaven" (John 3:13). That is the Heavenly Man as presented to us by John; Christ on earth, and at the same time still in heaven.

Now, in Christ, that becomes true of the Church, and is true of every member of the Church. In Christ we are here, and at the same time in heaven. We are in time, but we are also in eternity. The question arises, how can this be? It is a statement which needs explaining.

This brings us to the point where eternal and heavenly relationship is resumed. That relationship was broken off, interrupted. In Christ, as representative Man, it is resumed, taken up again. With Him it has never been interrupted. The interruption had to do with man, but through union with Christ that relationship--howbeit in a fuller way--is resumed, or restored to man. What is the point at which this resumption takes place? It is what is known amongst us as being born anew, or from above. Its law and its main spring is eternal life.

Israel and the Promises

Two things were evidently related in the Jewish mind. These were (1) The kingdom of heaven, and (2) Eternal life. Nicodemus asked what he must do to enter the kingdom of heaven. Another ruler, probably of the same school as Nicodemus, and perhaps of the same rank, asked this question: "Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" (Luke 10:25). These things were evidently accepted by the Jews as a promise. The Lord Jesus recognized and referred to that expectation when He said, "Ye search the scriptures, because ye think that in them ye have eternal life..." (John 5:39). There was a quest for eternal life, an expectation, a hope of eternal life, a persuasion that eternal life was a promise to be realized. These two things were linked together in their mind. Christ associates this hope with Himself and says concerning the testimony of the Scriptures, "...these are they which bear witness of Me." To such as can receive it, He indicates that He Himself is the way or ladder into heaven, the necessary means of getting there. We are, of course, referring to John one, and verse fifty-one. Now read verse forty-seven:

"Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and saith of him, Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile!"

Here is a pure Israelite. What can you say to a pure Israelite who is looking for the kingdom of heaven and eternal life, a man who is true, a man who is honest? The Lord has seen him under the fig tree, really pouring himself out in quest of the kingdom of heaven and eternal life, if what the Lord Jesus said to him is a clue to what was going on in his heart. He was of those who looked for the blessings of Israel.

Let us pause for a moment, and insert Psalm one hundred and thirty-three here in brackets. "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! ...for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore." How does the blessing come? Whence is this hope, this expectation of the blessing? Our question takes us back to the promise made to Abraham: "...in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). These Israelites were looking for the blessing of Abraham. But note what is further said: "...in Isaac shall thy seed be called" (Gen. 21:12). What does Isaac represent? Life from the dead, Divine life. The blessing of Abraham is life. Now note the words of the psalm: "...for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore." So you see that what they were in quest of was the blessing which had these two aspects, the kingdom of heaven, and eternal life.

In Nathanael we see an Israelite indeed in whom there is no guile, a pure man in a right quest. The Lord says to a man like that, "Ye shall see the heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." Are you in quest of the kingdom of heaven? "Ye shall see the heaven opened..." Are you wanting to get through? You will need a ladder, a way, a means, a vehicle: "Ye shall see... the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man."

Nathanael knew exactly to what the Lord was referring. An Israelite indeed, in whom there was no Jacob, was Nathanael! Let us recall the incident to which the Lord referred. "And Jacob... lighted upon a certain place... and he took one of the stones of the place, and put it under his head, and lay down in that place to sleep. And he dreamed, and behold, a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the Lord stood above it, and said... I am with thee, and will keep thee whithersoever thou goest.... And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said... How dreadful is this place! this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (Gen. 28:10-17) --Bethel, the House of God: the House of God, the gate of heaven. The Lord Jesus appropriates that and says, in effect: 'I am the House of God, I am the gate of heaven. Thou shalt see heaven open through Me.' Do you want to know how to reach heaven? Two things have to be considered; one is the fact of union with Christ, the other is that which is bound up with union with Christ--namely, eternal life.

Man by Nature an Outlaw

Let us stay with that for a moment. "Ye shall see the heaven opened...." Such a statement implies that the heavens have been closed. That, again, carries with it the fact that for man eternal life has also been put behind a closed heaven. Even for Nathanael, even for Nicodemus, even for a pure-hearted Israelite that is true by nature. Their longing is for an opened heaven. They are stretched out for the kingdom of heaven, but it is closed.

We know quite well that to everyone by nature, heaven is a closed realm. But a closed heaven is not God's thought for us. We belong to heaven. Christ belongs to heaven. The Church belongs to heaven. Yet the very place to which we belong is closed to us. The place with which we are related in the eternal counsels and purpose of God is closed to us by nature. That has its most terrible manifestation in those moments of the Cross, when the Lord Jesus, standing in the place of man in his sinful state, cried, "My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken Me?" Heaven is closed to Me; the place to which I belong, My heaven, My home, is closed to Me! I am an outcast from heaven!

Such is the state of man by nature, shut out from heaven, the place for which he was made, the place which belongs to him in the purpose of God. The Lord says to Nathanael, "Ye shall see the heaven opened." There is far more meaning in the phrase we so often use, "an open heaven," than we have recognized. What is it to enjoy an open heaven? It is to be at home in fellowship with the Lord; it is to have a heavenly life; it is to have all the heavenly resources at our disposal; all that heaven means is open to us, and we have come into that for which God brought us into being, which He intended to be ours from all eternity; that is an opened heaven. "Ye shall see the heaven opened...." Then the quest of the heart is satisfied, the promise realized. The principle of the opened heaven, or of the heavenly life, is what is called eternal life in Christ. Christ is the Heavenly Man, coming into time.

Christ and the Church

We have said once or twice that the Church is to be what the Heavenly Man was, and is, as to His being, as to the laws of His life, as to His ministry. Everything that is true about Him as the Heavenly Man has to become true of the Church. Thus, even as the Lord Jesus, as the Heavenly Man, was born here in time, so also is the Church, the corporate Heavenly Man, to have a birth here in time, and on the same principle as Christ was born.

How was Christ born? You will realise that we are leaving the question of Deity on one side. We are not touching that side at all. In the sense in which Christ was God incarnate, Immanuel, God with us, God manifest in the flesh, that is not true of us as members of the Church. That is understood. We are talking about the Heavenly Man, not of the Divine Son, not of Godhead. So that what is true of Him as the Heavenly Man as to His birth, has to be true of the whole Church in every part. Let us look at the birth of the Lord Jesus and mark how it is characterized by three things.

(1) The Word Presented

We go back to Luke, for Luke enlarges upon what John says. John compasses it all in one statement: "And the Word became flesh, and tabernacled among us...." It is Luke who gives us the fullest description of the Word being made flesh, the birth of Christ. We will not read the whole story, but we mark first of all how that the angel went to Mary, and began to present Mary with a statement. He made his statement to her, and then waited. In her perplexity she asked a question. He recognized her question, and again

waited. Then came the response: "Behold, the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to Thy word" (Luke 1:38). First of all the word offered: that is the first step in His birth, the word presented, the statement made. Then the angel waited. What are you going to do with it? How are you going to react to it? The word presents a challenge; always a costly challenge. That word is going to lead outside of the world, and is to bring the liberty of the world. Mary weighs the cost while the angel waits. The battle is fought, the storm for a moment rages, and then it is over, and in calm deliberateness, she responds, "...be it unto me according to Thy word."

Do you see what it means to be begotten of the word of God? The first step in this new birth, the first step into this heavenly life, is our attitude toward the presented word of God, and that will be found to govern every step in the heavenly life. Such is the nature of the first step, and it is equally that of every subsequent step. All the way through the Lord will be presenting us with His word, and with it a challenge, a cost, a price to be paid, and there will be conflict over it: Are we prepared to go that way? Are we prepared to accept that word? Are we prepared for what that word means, for what it involves? On the response to what is presented depends our knowledge of the heavenly life. From beginning to end it is like that.

That is why the Lord never first explains everything to unsaved people. Doctrine followed for believers but was never given for unbelievers. Clear, concise statements were made to unbelievers. To them there was a presenting of facts, boldly and deliberately. 'This is God's will. This is God's word. This you must do. Explanation will come later. Now, heaven is going to remain closed, or is going to be opened; the question of your entry into a heavenly life hangs in the balance as you decide what is to be your response to God's word. You will be born of that word, if you respond to it, begotten by the word of truth.' So the first thing is the word offered, and then, after some difficulty and conflict, accepted, received, surrendered to: "...be it unto me according to Thy word."

(2) The Word Germinating

What is the next step? The Spirit makes the word to germinate within. The Spirit generates within by means of the word. That is the second thing to be noted in the case of Mary, the Spirit generating, or implanting. Not until the word has found a response can that word become a living thing within. That is why an unsaved person can never know the meaning of the Word of God. The meaning of any word of God demands the inward work of the Holy Spirit to make it live, to make it germinate, and response to it opens the way for the Spirit.

(3) The Word (Christ) formed within Initially and Progressively

That is the third step. It is very simple when presented like that, but this is the way into heaven, into eternal life. Mark you, this is something other than of Mary, her race, and her nature. By the Holy Spirit there was a complete coming in between all that Mary was by nature and that Holy Thing. It is a very important matter, moreover, for us to recognize that in exactly the same way are we born anew. When Christ was born of Mary, or when Christ was (may we use the word?) generated in Mary, there took place in Mary something that was altogether above nature. Mary had a long natural lineage, and in that lineage there were all sorts of people, including several harlots. But when the Holy Spirit came in and formed Christ in her, He set all that aside and cut it off. That blood did not come into Christ. Remember that! He did not inherit aught of that, whatever it was, whether high or low, good or bad. The Holy Spirit cut it off, and Christ was something other than that, distinct: "...that holy Thing..." You can never say that of anything that is

inherited of the blood of Rahab, or of Ruth the Moabitess. It is something other.

Christ in us is something other than ourselves. That is what makes us heavenly. Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven. That is our natural stream, our natural history, the whole course of our Adamic relationship, which cannot inherit the kingdom of heaven. It is only what is of Christ that will inherit the kingdom of heaven. It is Christ in us Who is to us the hope of glory, and the only hope of glory. This is something other than of Mary, and her race and nature, something other than of ourselves. This which is begotten of God is of the Holy Spirit. You and I ever need to discriminate between what is of Christ in us and what is of ourselves, and not to get these things mixed. Nothing that is not of Christ is going to find acceptance. Everything has to measure up to Christ, to pass through the sieve of Christ, and the sieve is a very fine one; for everything has to go through the test of death, and death is a tremendous test. Is there anything that death can lay hold of? If there is, it will lay hold of it. All that is subject to death will succumb to death, and this old creation is nothing else but that. Christ is not subject to death; He cannot be holden of it, for there is nothing in Him upon which death can fasten. That is our hope of glory, Christ in us. This Holy Spirit dividing between Mary and Christ, between ourselves and Christ, this fundamental division made by the Holy Spirit, must be kept constantly in mind, for only as we do that can God reach His end. Mark you, God can reach His end far more rapidly where that discrimination is maintained, than He can where it is overlooked. That is the importance of believers being instructed of the Lord concerning that which is essential unto His purpose.

Christ was other than the rest of men in that respect. Even from childhood He had another consciousness, as we have occasion to note when He is at the age of twelve. Not finding Him in their company, His earthly parents sought Him, and found Him in the temple, and claimed Him as son: "Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold, thy father and I sought thee sorrowing." To this He replied, "...wist ye not that I must be in My Father's house?" (Luke 2:48,49). It is a reproof, but at the same time a disclosure of another consciousness. "Thy father and I..."--"...My Father's house..." That is not Joseph's house. Here is the setting of one Father over against the other, and of the One above the other. It is a heavenly consciousness, an eternal consciousness, a mark that He is "other," as begotten of the Holy Spirit.

When, begotten of the Holy Spirit, we come at once back into our eternal relationship with God in the Son, a new consciousness springs up within us, a consciousness that was not there before. This "new man" which has been put on, has a new consciousness as to heavenly relationships.

All that is embraced in the words "eternal life." We know that eternal life does not merely imply the fact of duration; it means a kind of life. That eternal life, that life from above, that Divine life in Christ, carries with it all that relates to the Heavenly Man.

Consider the Heavenly Man personally again. "In Him was life..."; "For as the Father hath life in Himself, even so gave He to the Son also to have life in Himself..." (John 5:26). In the Gospel by John, the Lord Jesus says much about Himself as the Heavenly Man, possessing heavenly life, and that heavenly life was the seat of the heavenly nature and the heavenly consciousness; it was through that heavenly life that He conducted Himself as He did. He was alive unto God by that life which He possessed, and this is seen in His being able to know God, to know the movements of God, the directions of God, the gestures of God, the restraints of God. It was all gathered up in that life. That is the principle of His life as of His birth. It is the principle of our birth, and alike the principle of our life as the corporate Heavenly Man.

The Gift of the Holy Spirit

That life is by the Holy Spirit. It is always related to a Person; it is not an abstract, a mere element. It is inseparable from the Person, which Person is the Holy Spirit; and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus. When you come to the Book of the Acts, you have a great deal disclosed about the gift of the Holy Spirit. If you look at it closely you will see that the coming of the Holy Spirit was invariably related to spiritual union with Christ. Pentecost marked the end of a physical relationship with the Lord Jesus as in the flesh, the end of that extraordinary period of His post-resurrection appearances. It is the beginning of an inward, spiritual relationship with Christ. We may mark the same feature at Cæsarea; they believed, and the Holy Spirit was given. At Samaria, again, hands were laid upon those who had believed, and the Holy Spirit was given. And one of the most interesting things in the Book of the Acts is that incident at Ephesus. When Paul came to Ephesus, he found certain disciples, and discerned something unusual in their condition, or was it something lacking? To them he says, "Did ye receive the Holy Spirit when ye believed?" (Acts 19:2; R.V.). That is the correct translation, not "since ye believed" as in the Authorized Version. That in itself assumes that believing implies the receiving of the Spirit. The two things go together. Paul could not quite understand this situation. It was something abnormal. Here were those who professed to believe in Christ, and who in a way had believed in Christ, but that which should go alongside of true faith was not there. Paul found himself confronted by a condition he had never met with before, and on his putting to them the question, "Did ye receive the Holy Spirit when ye believed?" they made answer, "Nay, we did not so much as hear whether the Holy Spirit was...." So Paul further enquires, "Into what then were ye baptized?" to which they replied, "Into John's baptism." Ah! now we have the clue. "John baptized with the baptism of repentance, saying unto the people, that they should believe on Him which should come after him, that is, on Jesus." So they had been baptized into John's baptism, unto an objective, future Christ; not baptized into Christ, but baptized toward Christ. Those are two different baptisms altogether. Paul commanded them to be baptized into the Name of the Lord Jesus, laid his hands upon them, and the Holy Spirit was given. Those two things go together. Union with Christ is shown to involve the receiving of the Spirit. That is not intended by the Lord to be something later on in the spiritual life; it should mark the commencement.

If in the Book of the Acts there are particular elements which throw up the whole matter into such clear relief, such as accompanying signs, those signs were only the Lord's way of emphasizing for all the dispensation what it means, that union with Christ involves the receiving of the Holy Spirit. How do you know? Well, He has shown it to this dispensation by bringing it out into clear relief in that way. He has laid it down so that no one can fail to see it. If you become occupied with the signs (tongues, etc.), but miss their signification, you will fail to see that those outward marks, those demonstrations, were only allowed as accompaniments, in order to emphasize the basic truth, namely, that union with Christ was now established. The gift of the Holy Spirit was the seal and proof of this. On what ground? By believing in Christ, by being baptized into Christ, eternal life is received in the Holy Spirit. And that life has heavenly capacities, within it are the powers of the age to come; and when in the ages to come its powers are fully released, we shall be endued with powers which far transcend our present powers. The age to come has been foreshadowed in tokens at the beginning. It may be that from time to time those powers are made manifest in the healing of the sick even now, but let us not fasten upon those tokens and make a doctrine of tokens and signs, begin to gather them up and systematize them, and make them the object of our quest. Let us remember that they are the tokens of something else, and you can have the "something else" apart from the tokens. When in truth you are baptized into Christ, you receive the Spirit of life in Christ, and in that life you are at once brought back into your heavenly relationship with the Heavenly Man; you become part of the corporate Heavenly Man.

It is what Christ is in us by His Spirit that determines everything. It determines all the values, settles forever the question of effectiveness, answers all the questions and problems. I wish we had this understanding, this knowledge sooner. If only we could have this as the foundation of our life from the beginning, what a lot we should be saved from.

Ministry is the expression of life, and not the taking on of a uniform and a title. Once I thought that to be in the ministry was to go into a certain kind of work, to come out of business, and, well, be a minister! So one got into the thing. Many, many are labouring and toiling in it, breaking their hearts, afraid to leave that order of things, lest they should be violating what they conceived to be a Divine call. Many others cannot get out of it because it is a means of livelihood, and they too are breaking their hearts. It is all false. Ministry is not a system like that. Ministry is the expression of life, and that is but saying in other words that it is the outworking of the indwelling of Christ. Disaster lies before the man or woman who ministers on any other ground than that. When the Lord gets a chance in us, and we really will trust Him on that ground, take our position there, He will show us that there is ministry enough for us; we shall not have to go round looking for it. The real labour so often is to get us down to that ground, the delivering of us from this present evil age even in its conception of the ministry, unto the heavenly ministry.

The Lord Jesus is our pattern. You see the spontaneous ministry, the restful ministry of that Heavenly Man. I covet that! It does not mean that we shall become careless, but it does deliver us from so much unnecessary strain. That is how it should be. May the Lord bring us to it; the Heavenly Man with the heavenly life as the full heavenly resource.

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