

Where Christendom Is Deceived

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between mysticism and spirituality, and highlights the dangers of confusing religion with spirituality.

Scripture: Proverbs 20:27, Romans 2:14

Topics: "True Worship", "Spirituality vs. Mysticism"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks addresses the critical distinction between mysticism and true spirituality, emphasizing that many in Christendom fail to recognize this difference. He illustrates how religious practices, while seemingly devout, can lead to spiritual death if they do not stem from a genuine relationship with God. Sparks warns against the dangers of relying on aesthetic experiences or ascetic practices, which do not equate to true spiritual life. He stresses that true spirituality is rooted in the spirit, characterized by conscience, communion, and intuition, and that it is through revelation and the new birth that one truly knows God. The sermon calls for a return to a faith-based walk in the Spirit, free from the trappings of human effort and religious imitation.

Transcript

Perhaps the greatest failure to make the great discrimination with which we are concerned is in relation to the difference between mysticism and spirituality. It is here that not only the world is mistaken but Christendom is deceived. Indeed, an overwhelmingly large proportion of those who would regard themselves as Christians are unable to distinguish between mysticism (pertaining to the sense of the beautiful) or asceticism (the practice of self-denial) on the one hand and spirituality on the other. The fact is that these belong to two entirely different realms, and the Word of God cuts clean in between them, dividing them asunder.

When we speak of Cain and "the way of Cain", we are accustomed to recall immediately his act of murder, born of jealousy and malice. We remember his peevish, querulous, petulant, ill-tempered or even insolent manner with God. But there is another side to remember, and we must be fair to Cain, or we miss the whole point. Cain did not exclude or ignore God. He was not in the usual sense of the word a godless man. He acknowledged God. Then he built an altar to God. Further, he no doubt selected the best of the products of his hard toil as worthy of God, and brought them. Here was devoutness in religion. Cain worshipped with his whole aesthetic sense, and Cain--murdered his brother! The Jews did the same in Christ's day. Christendom is largely constituted by this sense--its architecture, its ritual, its music, its

adornment, its lighting (or lack of it), its tone, its atmosphere, its vestments and so forth. All are of the soul. But Cain did not get through to God! Neither did the Jews! Spiritual death marks that realm, and while there may be intense emotions which make for resolves, 'high' thoughts and desires, there is no genuine change in the nature of those concerned, and repeated doses of this must be taken to maintain any measure of soul-self-satisfaction which makes them feel good. All religions have this soulish feature in common, more or less, and it is here that the fatal blunder has been made by many religious people who contend that other religions, which are undoubtedly devout and sincere, should not be interfered with, but the good in them should be recognized and accepted. It is the confusing of religion with what the Bible means by being spiritual. Religion can rise to high levels and sink to terrible depths. It is the same thing which does both. But that thing never rises above the human level; it never really reaches God. Religion can be the greatest enemy of God's true thought, because it is Satan's best deception. Asceticism is no more truly spiritual than aestheticism. There is no more a brief with God for rigours, denials, fastings, puritanic iciness, etc., as such, than for the opposite. Simplicity may give God a chance, but it is not necessarily spiritual. It may be a matter of taste. What sublime thoughts and ideas, in poetry, music and art often can go hand in hand with moral degeneracy and profligacy!

How near to the truth in perception and interpretation can the mystical go! What wonderful things can the imagination see, even in the Bible! What thrills of awe, amazement, ecstasy, can be shot through an audience or congregation by a master soul! But it may all be a false world with no Divine and eternal issues. It may all go to make up this life here, and relieve it of its drabness, but it ends there. What an artificial world we live in! When the music is progressing and the romantic elements are in evidence--the dress and tinsel--and human personalities are parading, see how pride and rivalry assert themselves, and what a power of make believe enters the atmosphere! Yes, an artificial world. We have been in it and know the reactions afterward.

How hollow, how empty; Dead Sea fruit! The tragedy in this melodrama is that it is 'real life' to so many. This soul-world is the devil's imitation. It is all false, wherever we may find it, whether associated with religion or not.

Those of us who have tasted of this world's springs have recognized the kinship between what is there and what is in religion so far as that soul-nature is concerned. It is only a matter of difference of realm, not of nature. What the music and drama of the world produce in one way--the soul-stirring, rousing, craving: the pathos, tears, contempt, hatred, anger, melancholy, pleasure, etc.--are all the same, only under different auspices and in a different setting, and the fact is, that it passes and we are really no further on. A little better music, a change of preacher, a less familiar place, a few more thrills, will perhaps stimulate our souls, but where are we, after all? How Satan must laugh behind his mask! Oh, for reality, the reality of the eternal! Oh, that men might see that, while a highly cultured soul with a keen sense of the beautiful and sublime is immeasurably preferable to a sordid one so far as this world is concerned, it is not necessarily a criterion that such has a personal living knowledge of God--of God as a Person--and has really been born anew! Occultism--the power to see deeper than the average, to sense what most do not sense, to handle the abstruse, to touch unseen forces--is not spirituality in the Divine sense. The soul realm is a complex and dangerous one, and can take most people out of their depths, but then land them into moral, mental and physical ruin, with all hope gone.

When we pray for 'Revival' let us be careful as to what we are after and as to what means we use to promote it, or carry it on.

Having been more precise as to the functions of the soul, we must go a little further at this point, as to those of the spirit.

The Attributes of the Human Spirit

As the soul is a trinity of reason, affection, and volition, so is the spirit a trinity. Its attributes are conscience, communion (worship) and intuition.

"The spirit of man is the lamp of the Lord" (Prov 20:27).

"Gentiles that have not the law do by nature the things of the law, these, not having the law, are the law unto themselves; in that they shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience bearing witness therewith, and their thoughts one with another accusing or else excusing" (Rom 2:14-15).

When Adam sinned, he did so as the result of what seemed to him a sound and right argument and reason, and a judgment of what was good and desirable. But immediately he had so acted he became aware of a faculty within, which rose up and condemned his judgment, reason and 'good (?) motive'. Henceforth he lived under a sense of condemnation. The conscience which accused him and caused him to excuse, could not restore him to God's favour, but for ever kept God in his consciousness. Thus it is that to live in and to be governed entirely by our souls is not to have rest and real life. It is possible to put our wills so strongly behind our reason and thought and desire, or so to surrender our wills to our emotions and affections, as to muffle the voice of conscience so that we have little or no conflict within. But should God come into "the garden in the cool of the day", or, in other words, should we at any time seek a living knowledge of God, we are in for a very bad time with regard to this former mentality, these former reasonings, and this former affectional life. But we are not saying that the human conscience is infallible and always right. Most certainly it is not. We can have a sense of right and wrong which is altogether misinformed and false, and Satan can play tricks with conscience. We are only pointing out what conscience is as an attribute of the spirit. For conscience to fulfil all of its Divinely intended purpose in relation to God--not merely to keep man aware of something beyond his own way--conscience must (as with the whole spirit) be renewed in God and united with the Holy Spirit. Christ is God's perfect standard for conscience, and union with Christ is the only ground of life in the spirit. "Christ... was made unto us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption" (1 Cor 1:30), and when Christ is received by faith, so that our standing before God rests upon what He is and not what we are, then we "find rest unto our souls" in this "yoke" (Matt 11:29), for we have our "hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience" (Heb 10:22). With the whole human spirit, conscience must be quickened from above, raised, enlightened, adjusted and related.

Having already spoken of worship in spirit and in truth, we can pass on to see the function of spirit by intuition. Here the difference between soul and spirit is very clear and definite. The spirit is the organ of spiritual knowledge, and spiritual knowledge is very different from natural or soul knowledge. How does God know things, and by what means does God come to His conclusions, decisions? On what basis of knowledge does He run the universe? Is it by reasoning inductively, deductively, philosophically, logically, comparatively? Surely all this laboriousness of brain is unknown to God. His knowledge and conclusions are intuitive. Intuition is that faculty of spiritual intelligence by which all spiritual beings work. Angels serve the will of God by intuitive discernment of that will, not by argued and reasoned conviction. The difference between these two is witnessed to by the whole monument of spiritual achievement. If human reason, the natural judgment and 'common sense' had been the ruling law, most, if not all, of the giant pieces of work

inspired by God would never have been undertaken. Men who had a close walk with God and a living spirit-fellowship with Him, received intuitively a leading to such purposes, and their vindication came, not by the approval of natural reason, but usually with all such reason in opposition. 'Madness' was usually the verdict of this world's 'wisdom'. Whenever they, like Abraham, allowed the natural mind to take precedence over the spiritual mind, they became bewildered, paralysed, and looked round for some 'Egypt' way of the senses, along which to go for help. In all this we are "justified in the spirit", not in the flesh. The spirit and the soul act independently, and until the spiritual mind has established complete ascendancy over the natural mind, they are constantly in conflict and contradiction. In all the things which are out from God and therefore spiritual, "the mind of the flesh is death; but the mind of the spirit is life and peace" (Rom 8:6). This, then, is the nature of spiritual knowledge.

The only knowledge of God which is of spiritual value for ourselves, or for others by our ministry, is that which we have by revelation of the Holy Spirit within our own spirits. God never--in the first instance--explains Himself to man's reason, and man can never know God--in the first instance--by reason. Christianity is a revelation or it is nothing, and it has to be that in the case of every new child of God; otherwise faith will be resting upon a foundation which will not stand in the day of the ordeal.

'The Christian Faith' embraced as a religion, a philosophy, or as a system of truth, a moral or ethical doctrine, may carry the temporary stimulus of a great ideal; but this will not result in the regeneration of the life, or the new birth of the spirit. There are multitudes of such 'Christians' in the world today, but their spiritual effectiveness is nil.

The Apostle Paul makes it very clear that the secret of everything in his life and service was the fact that he received his gospel "by revelation". We may even know the Bible most perfectly as a book, and yet be spiritually dead and ineffective. When the Scriptures say so much about the knowledge of God and of the truth as the basis of eternal life, resulting in being set free, doing exploits, etc., they also affirm that man cannot by searching find out God, and they make it abundantly clear that it is knowledge in the spirit, not in the natural mind.

Thus, a rich knowledge of the Scriptures, an accurate technical grasp of Christian doctrine, a doing of Christian work by all the resources of men's natural wisdom or ability, a clever manipulation and interesting presentation of Bible content and themes, may get not one whit beyond the natural life of men, and still remain within the realm of spiritual death. Men cannot be argued, reasoned, fascinated, interested, 'emotional', willed, enthused, impassioned, into the kingdom of the heavens; they can only be born; and that is by spiritual quickening. The new birth brings with it new capacities of every kind; and amongst these, the most vital is a new and different faculty of Divine knowledge, understanding and apprehension. As we have said earlier, the human brain is not ruled out, but is secondary, not primary. The function of the human intellect is to give spiritual things intelligent form for ourselves and for others.

Paul's intellectual power was not that which gave him his knowledge of truth; but it was taken up by the spirit for passing that truth on to others. He may have used his intellect well, as he certainly did, to study and acquire knowledge of the Scriptures; but his spiritual understanding did not come that way. It was the extra thing, apart from which even his Bible (Old Testament) knowledge had not kept him from a most mistaken course. The spirit of man is that by which he reaches out into the eternal and unseen. Intuition, then, is the mental organ of the spirit. It is in this sense--that is, the deadness of the spirit in the matter of Divine union and the going on with religion in its manifold forms of expression merely from the natural mind--that God says, "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (Isa 55:8);

and the measure of the difference is as the height of the heavens from the earth, of the heavenly from the earthly.

One of the chief lessons that we have to learn, and which God takes pains to teach us, is that spiritual ends demand spiritual means. The breaking down of the natural life, its mind, its energies, so far as the things of God are concerned, in the bitterness of disappointment through futility, failure, ineffectiveness and deadlock in real spiritual fruitfulness, is a life work: but the truth mentioned above is the explanation and key to the matter.

How important it is that every fresh undertaking in work for God should come by revelation to those chosen for it. Because God has so spoken and given revelation to some chosen instrument and a truly spiritual work has been done, others have taken it as a model and have sought to imitate it in other places. The result has been, and is, that they are called upon to take responsibility for it--find the resources of workers, funds and general support. This, in turn, issues in many sad and pathetic, if not evil and worldly, methods and means being employed, and those concerned find themselves in a false position. Conception, not imitation, is the Divine law of reproduction. Anointing, not human selection, is the Divine law of succession. The fact is, that the work of God has become a sphere for so many natural elements to find expression and gratification. Man must do something, see something, have something. Ambition, acquisition, achievement, etc., have found their way over to Christian enterprise, and so, very often (let us be quite frank) things have become 'ours'--'our work', 'our mission', 'our field', 'our clientele'; and jealousies, rivalries, bitterness and many other things of the flesh abound.

It is a very difficult thing, a crucifixion indeed, for the natural man to do nothing and have nothing, and especially to know nothing. But in the case of His most greatly used instruments, God has made this a very real part of their training and preparation. The utter emptying of all self-resource is the only way to have "all things of (out from) God" (2 Cor 5:18). On this basis, even Christ elected to live. We need not remind you of Moses' "I am not eloquent" (Exo 4:10), and Jeremiah's "I am a child" (Jer 1:6), and Paul's "that we should not trust in ourselves" (2 Cor 1:9). These were of a school in which the great lesson of the difference between natural and spiritual was taught experimentally.

God's Special Concern

This will help us to see that God's special concern is with the spirit in the believer.

Firstly, we must realize that His quest is for sons of His Spirit. The underlying and all-inclusive truth of what has come to be called the parable of the Prodigal Son is the transition from one kind of sonship, i.e. on the ground of law, to another, i.e. on the ground of grace; from the flesh to the spirit. There is a sonship of God by creation on the basis of law. In this sense, all men are the offspring of God, and Paul used this phrase in quite a general way to the Athenians (Acts 17:28,29). But by the Fall--the "going astray", or "deviating" (Gen 6:3)--all the Divine purposes and possibilities of that relationship have broken down, and that relationship is no longer of value. "He is flesh", hence he is separated from God--"alienated" (Eph 4:18), in a "far country", "lost", and "dead". Here grace enters and the Spirit through grace. The Spirit begins operations in that realm of death and distance, convicting of sin "against heaven" (Luke 15:21) (the only adequate conviction), compassing the end of the works of the flesh in despair and destruction, constraining, assuring, producing penitence and confession, and at length bringing to the place of forgiveness and acceptance: from death unto life, but not the same life as before. "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6). This man is the product of the travail and energizing of the Spirit, and

everything in the relationship afterward is new; a "robe", the robe of Divine righteousness; "shoes", a walk and a way in the Spirit (Rom 8:2,4); "a ring", the symbol of authority, the right or jurisdiction of a son (John 1:12,13); "the fatted calf", food such as was not his before, the best of the father's house. Each of these points in the Scriptures has a whole system of teaching.

The spirit of man, being the place of the new birth and the seat of this only true sonship (Gal 4:5,6), is also therefore "the new man", for it is "in newness of the spirit" that we are to live (Rom 7:6, etc.). Here it is that all the operations of God in our education, fellowship and co-operation have their base.

The 'prodigal's' knowledge of the father after his 'new birth' was such as he had never possessed before. He really did not know his father until grace came in. His spirit had been brought from death, darkness, distance, desolation, chaos, and he then had not just an objective knowledge of one whom he had termed 'father', but a subjective and experimental understanding and appreciation of him, because the spirit of sonship had been born within him or given to him whereby he cried "Abba, Father". There is no saving relationship to, or knowledge of, God except through grace and by new birth.

So, then, those who by being born anew have become "little children" (Matt 18:3) or "babes" in spiritual things (1 Cor 3:1)--not wrong if we do not remain such--have to learn every thing afresh, because "all things have become new" (2 Cor 5:17,18). Such have to learn a new kind of knowledge, to live by a new kind of life, "newness of life" (Rom 6:4). Paul says that we are to act as those who are "alive from the dead" (Rom 6:13). We have to learn that our life, our natural life, cannot do God's will, live as God requires, or do God's work.

Only by His risen life is this possible. An element of offence in this truth is that it demands a recognized and acknowledged weakness; it requires that we have to confess that, in ourselves, for all Divine purposes, we are powerless and worthless, and that of ourselves we can do nothing. The natural man's worship of strength, efficiency, fitness, ability, meets with a terrible rebuff when it is confronted with the declaration that the universal triumph of Christ, over hierarchies more mighty than those of flesh and blood, was because "he was crucified through weakness" (2 Cor 13:4); God reduced to a certain impotency!

And "God chose the weak things... to confound the things that are mighty" (1 Cor 1:25-27). To glory in infirmity, that Christ's power may rest upon him, is a far cry from the original Saul of Tarsus; but what an extraordinary change in mentality! God has, however, always drawn a very broad line between natural "might" and "power" on the one hand, and "My Spirit" on the other (Zech 4:6), and for evermore that distinction abides. This 'new-born babe' has to learn a new walk, now in the Spirit as different from nature.

There may be many slips and perhaps tumbles, but such are not altogether evil if they are marks of a stepping out in faith rather than sitting still in fleshly disobedience or fear. We have shown that the nature of this walk is that reason, feeling, and natural choice are no longer the directive laws or criteria of the spiritual man. For such an one there are frequent experiences of a collision and contradiction between soul and spirit. The reason would dictate a certain course, the affections would urge in a certain direction, the will would seek to fulfil these judgments and desires; but there is a catch somewhere within--a dull, leaden, lifeless, numbed something at the centre of us which upsets everything, contradicts us, and all the time in effect says No!

Or it may be the other way round. An inward urge and constraint finds no encouragement from our natural judgment or reason, and is flatly contrary to our natural desires, inclinations, preferences or affections:

while in the same natural realm we are not at all willing for such a course. In this case it is not the judgment against the desire, as is frequently the case in everybody's life, but judgment, desire and will are all joined against intuition. Now is the crisis! Now is to be seen who is to rule the life! Now the "natural" man, or the outer man of sense, and the "inner" man have to settle affairs.

To learn to walk in the Spirit is a life-lesson of the new man, and as he is vindicated--as he always will be in the long run--he will come to take the absolute ascendancy over the "natural" man and his mind; and so by the energizing of the Holy Spirit in the spirit of the new man, the Cross will be wrought out to the nullifying of the mind of the flesh (which, in spiritual things, always ends in death) and in the enthronement of the spiritual mind which is "life and peace" (Rom 8:6).

This, then, is the nature of the walk in the Spirit, and its application is many-sided. But we must remember the law of this walk, which is faith. We walk in the Spirit but "we walk by faith" (2 Cor 5:7).

To walk by faith there must, in the very nature of the case, be a stripping off of all that the outer man of the senses clings to, demands, craves as a security and an assurance.

When the spiritual life of God's people is in the ascendant, they are not overwhelmed by either the absence of human resources on the one hand, or by the presence of humanly overwhelming odds against them on the other hand.

This is patent in their history as recorded in the Scriptures. But it is also true that when the spiritual life is weak, undeveloped, or at an ebb, they look round for some tangible, seen resource upon which to fasten. Egypt is the alternative to God whenever and wherever spiritual life is low. To believe in and trust to the intuitive leadings of the Holy Spirit in our spirit, even though all is so different from the ways of men, and even though such brings us to a Canaan which for the time being is full of idolatry and where a mighty famine reigns: where all is so contrary to what our outer man has decided must be in keeping with a leading and a promise of God; to leave our old, sphere of life in the "world", to break with our kindred, our father's house, for this--this! and then to have to wait through much continuous stripping off of those means, and methods, and habits, and judgments, which are the very constitution of the natural man--this is the law of the spiritual walk, but this is God's chosen and appointed way of the mightiest vindication. Spiritual children and riches, and fruitfulness, and service, permanence, and the friendship of God, are for such Abrahams of faith or such children of Abraham in the spirit. God has laid a faith-basis for His superstructure of spiritual glory, and only that which is built upon such a foundation can serve spiritual ends. Let this be the test of our walk in all personal, domestic, business and Church affairs. Here, again, we have a principle which, if applied, would be revolutionary, and would call for the abandonment of a tremendous amount of carnal, natural, worldly stuff in our resources and methods. "Faith apart from works is dead" (James 2:26). True, but the works of faith--of the spirit--are not those of the flesh; the two realms are not comparable. The walk in the flesh is one thing, but the walk in the Spirit is quite another. The things of the Spirit are foolishness to the flesh. Men of faith see what others do not, and act accordingly. This also being true of men who have lost their reason, the two are often confused, and the children of the flesh think the children of the spirit mad or insane. They are unable to discriminate between even the insanity of men and "the foolishness of God", which is "wiser than men" (1 Cor 1:25).

Abraham was fortified by his faith, but his walk by faith was intensely practical, though so different from the walk in the flesh. A writer has said that faith brings us into difficulties which are unknown to men who walk in the flesh, or who never go out in faith. But such difficulties place us beyond the power of the flesh to

help, and make special Divine revelations necessary, and God always takes advantage of such times to give such needed education of the spirit. It is thus that the men of the spirit are taught and come to know God as no others know Him. Thus, faith is the law of the walk of the new man--the inner man--which brings him by successive stages into the very heart of God, Who crowns this progress with the matchless designation, "my friend"! (Isa 61:8).

One other thing in general has to be mentioned. The new man of the spirit has to learn a new speech. There is the language of the spirit, and he will have to realize increasingly that speech with "enticing words of man's wisdom", or what man calls "excellency of speech" (1 Cor 2:1,4), will avail nothing in spiritual service. If all the religious speech and preaching and talking about the gospel which goes on in one week were the utterance of the Holy Spirit, what a tremendous impact of God upon the world would be registered! But it is obviously not so and this impact is not felt. It is impossible to speak in and by the Holy Spirit without something happening which is related to eternity. But this capacity belongs only to the "born of the Spirit" ones, whose spirits have been joined to the Lord, and even they have to learn how to cease from their own words and speak as they are moved by the Holy Spirit. It is a part of the education of the inner man to have his outer man slain in the matter of speech, and to be brought to the state to which Jeremiah was brought--"I cannot speak; for I am a child" (Jer 1:6). Not only as sinners have we to be crucified with Christ, but as preachers, or speakers, or talkers. The circumcision of Christ, which Paul says is the cutting off of the whole body of the flesh, has to be applied to our lips, and our spirit has to be so much in dominion that, on all matters where God cannot be glorified, we "cannot speak". A natural facility of speech is no strength in itself to spiritual ministry; it may be a positive menace. It is a stage of real spiritual development when there is a genuine fear of speaking, unless it is in words "which the Holy Ghost teacheth" (1 Cor 2:13). On the other hand a natural inability to speak need be no handicap. To be present "in weakness, and in fear, and in much trembling" (1 Cor 2:3), may be a state which befits an apostolic, nay, rather, a Holy Spirit ministry. The utterance of God is a very different thing in every way from that of man. How much is said in the Scriptures about "conversation", "the tongue", "words" etc., and ever with the emphasis that these are to be in charge of the spirit, and not merely expressions of the soul in any of its departments!

If it is true that only the quickened spirit can receive Divine revelation, it is equally true that such revelation requires a Divine gift of utterance in order to realize its spiritual end. It is possible to preach truth without the preacher having any spiritual apprehension of it; that is, from a merely mental apprehension. The preaching may be just natural ability; but the grievous fact may be that neither the one who preaches nor those to whom he preaches will be in the good of the living and working values of the truth. The spiritual results are hardly worth the effort and expenditure. The virtue of speech resulting in abiding fruit to the glory of God, whether that speech be preaching, teaching, conversation, prayer, is not in its lucidity, eloquence, subtlety, cleverness, wit, thoughtfulness, passion, earnestness, forcefulness, pathos, etc., but in that it is an utterance of the Holy Ghost.

"Thy speech betrayeth thee" may be applied in many ways, for whether we live in the flesh or in the spirit, in the natural man or in the spiritual man, will always be made manifest by how we speak and the spiritual effect of the fruit of our lips.

Oh, for crucified lips amongst God's people, and oh, for lips among God's prophets, touched with the blood-soaked, fire-charged coal from that one great altar of Calvary!

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