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On the Foundations and the Beginnings of the Christian Life

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Now I am going to just talk to you very simply; I trust that the people who know all about it won't think it is too simple, but I feel we want to be quite clear about our foundations, our beginnings, and so I shall risk being as simple as I possibly can in what I have to say.

I am going to take as the foundation of our little time of meditation, the eighth chapter of the letter to the Romans. Romans 8, and I expect you immediately say: "Well, we know that one", and yet, you know, we may know a lot about it, and still we may not know as it has to be known. You will know this to begin with, that the last section of this chapter is an immensely comprehensive thing. It reaches right back into the "before times eternal", takes us back there, and gives us just a glimpse into what was happening with God before this world was. And then in the same section it takes us right on beyond these stages, to the ages of the ages, and tells us what things will be like then so far as we are concerned. So this is a very big context of the chapter. And in saying that, I have enunciated a principle which you will do well to remember, that in order to have a Christian life that is really great, you have got to have it in its great setting.

I have always felt, and the longer I live, the more strongly I do feel, that it is a mistake to just try to keep people to little fragments, what is called the 'simple Gospel' even at the beginning. If you are going to have a great Christian life, you want to see from the beginning what a big thing it is you

have come into; what a tremendous context the Christian life has, that people, even before they have made a beginning, are impressed with this: that it is no little thing to be a Christian. Then you have a very good starting-point. And if they start on that, they will make better progress, and they will arrive at something much fuller, in a quicker way, than if you just dole it out in little fragments as you go along.

Now, remember that, and if sometimes it seems too big for you, you say: "That is a very good thing; I would not have it as small as I am; there needs to be something very big to get me anywhere!" And the bigger it is, the mightier is the dynamic and the motive for the Christian life. So, this chapter, in its last section particularly, is a strategic thing in the movement of this whole letter, and you will see that.

The Gateway to the Christian Life

You know that the first seven chapters are what we might call the Gateway into the Christian life. I am not going to stay for an explanation of them, but that is what they are unto; seven chapters on the gateway into the Christian life. The word that will be written on the portal of that gate is 'faith' and the gate itself, 'the cross'. Through faith in the Cross of the Lord Jesus is the way in, and seven chapters are taken up with the way in. And then when you come to chapter 8, you find what is there when you are inside; what kind of situation, what kind of a life is this, what is this that you have come into.

The Real Nature of the Christian Life

Chapter 8 presents to us the real nature of the Life into which we have come. And I suppose it is one of the most elementary things which you have heard and noted many times, that one word stands out in this chapter, one word. One of the first things I did as a young fellow in Bible study was to underline the words in different chapters, to see how many times any one particular word occurred. When I got to this chapter, and underlined one particular word, I found that this chapter was simply smothered with this word. It is the word 'Spirit'. If you just go through this chapter and put a line under the word 'Spirit' or 'the Spirit', you will see that, well, there is very little left to talk about. It all centres in and circles round, and springs from this matter of the Spirit. It begins there: "The law of the Spirit of Life in Christ Jesus". We are in, through the door, you see. Seven chapters, and Paul was in; and what we find here is what we may call:

The Life in the Spirit

We need to understand what that kind of life is; what that really means, because we have now come into the peculiar character of a dispensation which is altogether new. There have been dispensations in the past. There were dispensations in the Old Testament, as you probably know, which we will not mention in particular. But now those dispensations are past; each has followed the other, and the Old Testament, with all its different phases and stages, is closed. And with the New Testament, a completely new age has been introduced, with a character all of its own, a character which never was before, and probably will never be again after this dispensation.

You and I live in a period of time marked off by the coming of the Lord Jesus in the first place, and the coming of the Lord Jesus again, which is a particular and peculiar phase and aspect in the whole course of the ages. And the peculiar characteristic of this time in which you and I live, is that it is the

dispensation of the Holy Spirit. And if that is true, there is one thing in which I am sure you will agree with me: we do need to know the time in which we live. We need to know what is the order of things from God's standpoint in the time in which we live. In the Old Testament, they had to learn that for themselves as to their time, what time they were living in. You and I have got to know this: what is the time we are living in? And the answer is that this is the age, or dispensation of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit has come; He has introduced a new order of things entirely; and until we understand that order, we shall not make any progress in our Christian life; it is very necessary for us to understand that.

Well, in the first place, the effect of the Holy Spirit, simply but fundamentally, is that He joins us with Christ; He brings about a vital union with the Lord Jesus. "He that is joined to the Lord is one spirit"; it is a spiritual and inward union with the Lord Jesus. The words, and language, I know, are so simple, and perhaps so well-known, that they may not grip you very forcefully, but out of this everything comes.

You and I, if we are truly born-again children of God, have got to know that right inside of us a union has been effected between Christ and ourselves, and ourselves and Christ, that we are joined to Christ. That union has been effected; we have been made one. Now, you see, if you are one, you are not two! That is quite obvious, of course, but there is more than that sounds. Very often, you know, we are two, you know; even in the Christian life, the Lord is 'that', and I am 'this'! The Lord's way of illustrating this, as you know, is the marriage ties: "And they twain shall become one flesh"; and Paul says: "I speak a mystery concerning Christ and the church" - 'one flesh'.

Now, if that union is what it ought to be, those two people are so one that to separate them is to cut one person in two, and only leave two halves and not a whole. Now that is the illustration of our union with Christ, that we are not complete until we are united with Christ; our completeness is in union with Christ. And we are only half here if we haven't got Christ; if we lose the Lord, the effect is that we have torn our very person in two; we have torn ourselves asunder, or we have been torn asunder. And you know that spiritually, although the division may not be utter and final, we can, by disobedience, by playing with sin, we can bring about that effect. Then we feel: 'Well, something has happened; the Lord is there and I am here, and we are not together' - and it is as though we have been torn in two, and are not complete.

We could dwell much upon that, but you see, that is the beginning of the Christian life; that is the very foundation and basis of the Christian life. We and Christ have been made one, not two, one! To divide now, is not just to walk away and have an independent life, it is to destroy your own identity, your own spiritual personality; to tear it in pieces. And that is how it is if we get away from the Lord in any way. So here, we find that the very first thing about this life in the Spirit is that there has come about a oneness between us and Christ, and Christ and ourselves, which is not in any outward sense, but in a vital, inward reality. And you know that that is quite true, I am sure; in greater or lesser degrees, you know.

We must not stop with every part of this life in the Spirit, but the next thing that this chapter tells us is this: "The Spirit Himself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are children of God". The first thing is: the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus; that is the union. Now, the Spirit in us; union with Christ; the Spirit bears witness with our spirits that we are children of God. How does He do that? Well, the Holy Spirit does not constantly speak in our ear, and say: "You know, you are a child of

God". But the Holy Spirit says what He does on the basis of being children of God, so that you know it. You know how others can do certain things we cannot; we know that we cannot take even our cue from others. There is something that we have in our own heart which makes us aware that this is, or this is not, according to the Father's mind. That is how it works out, putting it into language, giving it terms.

The simple truth is this - we *know*; the Spirit beareth witness; we know. I have many times in my life fallen back on that quite deliberately. We may come to very real testings, trials, and dark times, and many adverse circumstances and conditions, and be tempted to wonder if we are the Lord's at all. Those questions can come up because of things and experiences; and many times in my long Christian life, I have just fallen back on this - yes, but what about this and that from the beginning. I can recall again and again times, instances, when the Lord Himself definitely held me, or spoke to me, and made me know that this was right, and this was wrong. It was something that I never received, I never got any advice, counsel, or anything, but I knew it in myself. I could tell you again and again, instances like that right back from the beginning of the Christian life, where I could not do what I did before I was the Lord's. Something said: "You just can't; no, not now; you just cannot do it". And it was as real, more real than any audible voice. And that has gone on through life, again and again, in different connections.

It sounds very simple, but I have had to say to myself: what is that, coming right from the inside? That is the Spirit bearing witness with my spirit that I am a child of God and a child of God does not behave like that; a child of God does not do those things, but a child of God does do these things. That is what it amounts to all the way along. The Spirit says: others can; you cannot; you are a child of God. And so on.

Well, there you are; simple, but very real - the Spirit bearing witness. That is to be the basic law of our Christian life. Now, every one of you who is a child of God ought to know what I am talking about and I am quite sure you do, to some extent. If you have not gone very far with the Lord, if you are not the Lord's yet, let me say, this is what it means to be a Christian, it is something real on the inside.

Now we come to another thing in this chapter. As you look at it you will find that this means that we are constituted in an altogether different way from all other people; that the Holy Spirit, coming inside, has created and constituted a new kind of being, a new kind of human being, a different kind of humanity from all the rest of humanity. Now, that is saying a tremendous thing; but this is not something advanced in the Christian life; it is something fundamental to the Christian life at the very beginning.

We use the word 'species'; well, the Holy Spirit has created and constituted a new and different species of humanity. The fundamental reality about a true child of God is that a child of God is different from all other people who are not children of God. The difference is not that they have decided to be religious and go to meetings, and company with Christian people, and do this and that and lots of things, and give up a lot of other things. That is not it at all; but their very being, constitution, has been changed; they are different people.

Again, you know how true this is. In the world you know that when you really have become the Lord's and this great change has taken place inside, this something has happened inside, you go back into the world and you know that there are two kinds of humanity in your office, in your

workshop, in your factory, in your school, or wherever you are. You are one, and the other, another. And though on the outside there may be no difference in appearance, and so on, but there is just the same difference as there was between the Lord Jesus when He was here on this earth and the other people in this world. While He could understand them, they could never understand Him. It was just as though they were living in two different worlds. As He said: "You are from beneath; I am from above". And that is exactly true of every child of God: I am from above; this is no longer my place; this is no longer my home; I am no longer at rest here in this world; I have got a new location; I have got a new nativity; I have got a new country; a new land; I'm just quite an alien here in this world. Well, that becomes a very real thing to the child of God, sometimes a very unpleasant thing to feel out of it, but there you are, you have got to accept it and never try to violate that; never try to be at home in this world. If you do, you will be doing damage to your new constitution, because it is that, that is your testimony. Not that you try to be different at all. Never try to be different; never put it on! Never try to make the impression that you are different. If you want any proof that you are different, you will find that the devil knows you from that time; you are a marked person, just as Christ was a marked man when He was here. And, as far as this world was concerned, and those who were under the enemy's control, He could never do anything right; everything He said, even His good, was wrong; everything that He did well, they found fault with it.

I was reading only today, the amazing things He did going about the country, doing good, casting out demons, healing those who were sick; leaving behind Him a train of people made whole and delivered, set free, blessed with a new life and a new outlook. But these people come along and said: 'By the prince of the devils He casts out devils!' They put it all down to the devil - He could not do right, you see. Ah, the devil knows the children of God as he knew the Son of God. And somehow or other, a lot of things come to us which would never come to us if we were not children of God, for that simple reason - we are different, and we are known. And it is sensed; sometimes it is almost uncanny how men of this world sense it; they are not able to explain it, they are not able to say why they take these attitudes toward us, they just cannot tell us. In fact, when you say, "Why do you look at me like that? Why do you feel like that about me? Why do you...?" "Well, I don't know why, but somehow or other...!" They can't explain it, don't understand it at all, but, there it is; a fundamental difference of constitution and you could be people of different races altogether who have no understanding of one another. Well, it is like that; the Spirit coming in makes us different. It is just that difference that is the basis of everything for the future. Never try to modify that difference, but never make it artificial and let people think you are a goody-goody, and you are putting it on, trying to be different. You are different, right enough; you won't have to put anything on at all if you live in the Spirit. We are constituted differently, and we must understand that that is a fact. That is really what it is to be 'born of the Spirit'.

Well, we have been constituted by the Spirit according to a Divine and heavenly order, and the course of our Christian life should be one of getting further and further away from the old order. I believe that that is what is meant here in this chapter by: "These are the sons of God, which are led by the Spirit of God" - led by the Spirit of God. Now, you may take hold of that and apply it to 'leading' in things. It may apply to being 'led' about things; this is what we call 'guidance'. But I believe that here, at any rate, whatever it means for such guidance in particular matters, I believe the setting of these words demands this interpretation of that, because you cannot lift these things out of this great context. And this is, as we have seen, a tremendous context from eternity to eternity. The point that this chapter brings into view is that God started up something before this world was, where we are concerned - "whom He foreknew". We were "foreordained to be conformed to the image of His Son". This is right back there; God started up something and swept

down into the ages with that purpose; moving towards that - conformity to the image of His Son; the great goal.

Now, what is being 'led by the Spirit'? Well, take the illustration of Israel: God came down into the dark world of their bondage and tyranny in Egypt. He came down with His purpose, took possession of them, and gave them the symbol and figure of the Holy Spirit in the pillar of cloud and fire. It says: "They were all baptized into Moses in the cloud." Well, this is an illustration. What was the 'pillar of cloud and fire' given for? It is a type of the Holy Spirit, to lead them into the Land of Promise where God had intended them to be; the purpose for which He had come down into Egypt and got hold of them and pulled them out and brought them into the Wilderness; the Spirit is ever moving ahead of them in the Pillar, to get them into the Land. And that is being 'guided by the Spirit'. As the Lord said, 'Let My son go... let My son go...', speaking of Israel - "Now these are the sons of God, who are led by the Spirit of God". It means that you are moving on, ever moving on in this way of the Spirit, in this leaving further and further behind the old order, and getting nearer and nearer to the heavenly order.

Now this is true of the Christian life, if the Christian life is normal. This is not something abnormal; this is the normal Christian life. This is what is real about it, that the longer you go on with the Lord, the more you go on with the Lord, the less and less do you find it possible to accept this world and enjoy it, and settle down here. As the things of the Lord get nearer and nearer, and more and more engrossing, taking your life, the further you seem to get away from it, or it seems to get away from you. You find that whereas you could divide your time, at one time, you could spread it out over things, now, more and more you are being absorbed, not obsessed, but absorbed in the things of the Lord. You do not have time for other things. You do your work, you go to work, you give yourself to your work; you do it honestly... but the thing that has got a grip on you inside is the Lord's interests. 'Being let go', you go to your own people! They are the Lord's people. Is that not true? If you are going on with the Lord, oh, what you want is more and more of that which belongs to your own constitution, the heavenly order of things. And that is what it means to be 'led by the Spirit'. Whatever 'guidance by the Spirit' means in things, in details, this is what it means here in the great context; the Spirit is leading us on nearer and nearer to the fulness of Christ. Now we can test our lives, of course, by that.

The next thing in the life of the Spirit is that the Holy Spirit gifts us and qualifies us for a place, a part, in this great purpose of God. This again, is something that I want you to take to heart, because it means so much. In this realm, the matter of natural qualifications is not the argument at all.

I do remember, (and you must forgive if I put in testimony, because I want to keep this near to life, because it is real) I do remember how, early in my Christian life, in the consciousness of many deficiencies and defectivenesses, and things that I wished I had had, there were ambitions that were mine that I was never able to realise; desires that I had in this life for learning, and that sort of thing, to become qualified in this or in that. They were all cut off from me when I came to the Lord and so I had to face life pretty much without this background that I wanted. And then I came early to see that this matter of natural qualifications is not the argument at all with the Lord. I saw this from both sides; that there are many who have tremendous natural qualifications, or qualifications by acquiring, achievement, studying, every advantage, but they are not necessarily spiritual people. And it never meant, and it never does mean, (and you can prove this) that because you have got a tremendous background of scholarship, education, or qualification of that kind, that you have a special aptitude for grasping spiritual things.

The thing that I have been amazed at again and again is, that I have met some tremendously 'highbrow' people, who have all the advantages of academic training, and when I have talked to them about the Lord, they don't know what I am talking about. I am talking about Christians! They just don't know; they can't grasp it at all! And I have met others, who do not have any of those qualifications and advantages, who know the Lord, and you can just go as far as ever you like on spiritual things, and they have got it, they see. And that is a great thing to learn early in the Christian life; it is not what I have, or what I have not got naturally. The Holy Spirit is qualification for what God wants - what the New Testament calls 'gifts of the Spirit'. And while we have some catalogues of those gifts, I am quite certain we have not got all the gifts the Holy Spirit mentioned; we have not got all the gifts mentioned that the Holy Spirit will give: qualifications, equipments for a place in the whole scope of Divine interests and values.

I want you to take that to heart. It may be that you are one of the least, and that there is not much hope for you, but, if you have got the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit can and will qualify you for something that is your particular part in the whole. And people can say: "You know, he, or she... not very much naturally, you know; you would not think very much of them if you looked at them, but he counts; he or she counts, you know; and this is the way in which they count..." see, it is like that. The Holy Spirit has come to give us something we have not got naturally, and we cannot get naturally; it is the particular equipment of the Holy Spirit. Now, don't think in terms of wonderful, public gifts; it may never be that. In some simple quiet way, you may be an effective faculty in the whole corporate body. That is what this means, to have the Holy Spirit; that we are something more in accountability than we are naturally or could be, even at our best naturally. It is something different. Leave that, and go to the Lord about it. It is not always that the Lord will tell you what your gift is, but other people will know. That is just where you count for the Lord; just how you particularly mean something for the Lord.

I want to come to one more very important aspect of this whole matter of the Spirit. Supposing we take an illustration from the last section of the book of Exodus, which contains the whole story and account of the making of the tabernacle in the Wilderness. And you will know that it was by the Holy Spirit that that whole thing was constituted and constructed and that the Spirit came upon certain men for that work, and then gathered under those Spirit-governed men all the people, all the people came into action.

While it does not definitely say so, it as good as says that the whole nation was in this business; they were all doing something about it; they all had something to give. Some had linen to give; some had other materials to give; but they all had something, and I suppose you could see 'sewing parties' all over the camp, and men at work busy at this thing and that - some on wood, some on gold, some on silver, some on brass. Everywhere they were occupied with this, all under this direction and instruction and counsel of Spirit-filled men; that is to say, they were all under the government of the Spirit. The anointing, so to speak, spread itself all over the whole mighty host for work.

Now, my point is this, that the Holy Spirit creates corporate vocation. Now you think: here are some women making a curtain for the tabernacle. Well, are they going to have their own little 'tabernacle' made of their one little curtain? All of their own? Here are some men making a part, just a part, of wood, perhaps to be overlaid with gold - is that the tabernacle? Are they going to have a little tabernacle of that thing that they are making, and a little church of their own? It is nonsense, you see. Now, you see what I am getting at, that all this, by the Spirit, is one thing; it is a corporate vocation. That is, they are not living for their little bit; they are living for the whole. They are not

working for their little bit, they are working for the whole. They have got the vision of the whole, and their whole life is taken up with, not their little bit in itself as an end, they are as a whole. They are living for the tabernacle in completeness; working for the tabernacle in completeness. The Holy Spirit has brought them together, and bound them into a oneness in corporate vocation.

All the vocation is one, because they are under one Spirit. Well, that is an Old Testament illustration, but in the New Testament, what does that mean? What does that mean now? If you and I are really under the government of the Holy Spirit, under the anointing of the Spirit, as we should be, we will not have any little private things of our own, any little 'hole in a corner' business of ours, any detached and unrelated thing to which we are giving ourselves. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of unity and of unity in vocation. What it will amount to is this: we will live for the whole. And if it is a matter of our local relationships, take any company here or there, none of us is living other than the whole. We ought to be living for the complete thing; the corporate vocation ought to have got a grip of us. I am not living and working as an individual; I am living and working as a part of a whole. And, in the appointment of God, for the time being, my local whole is there, and I am living for that; I work for that; that is my vocation.

Now, there is a tremendous amount bound up with that, if you realise it, and it is all in the Word of God. I am giving you in a few words, the sum of so much. So many people are wondering about their service, wanting to be in the Lord's work, and to know what their work is, or to do something for the Lord, some sort of ministry, some sort of work. What is my work? What is my ministry? What is my job? It is always, "my, my, my...". The answer is: your job is this: 'they' is 'them'; your vocation is related; it is a related thing. You will find the Holy Spirit coming in and using you when you link yourself on with all the rest, and become part of the whole, whereas He may not do anything at all with you if you keep yourself in any detachment. Then He will just leave you; you will be doing nothing, and be counting for nothing. But, we must recognise this great law of Divine revelation, that the Spirit makes us one in a great vocation. The vocation is not our personal vocation at all; it is the vocation of the whole, it is the vocation of the church.

You see, I am in Ephesians all the time: "Walk worthy of the calling, or 'vocation', wherewith ye are called" and the context is the relatedness, our relationship one to another in vocation. It is the church's vocation; it is not yours; it is not mine. This is not my vocation; this is not your vocation, as something personal, as something detached. And you notice whenever people go off on a personal, unrelated line, (and I am speaking after fifty years' experience), they become an end in themselves; and when they go, that is the end. It started with them, and it finished with them, and now you have got to start all over again.

Well, perhaps you like it to be like that - so important that things start and finish with you - but that is not God's idea, and most certainly you will agree with me when I say, we don't want it to be like that. We are not living unto ourselves, and dying unto ourselves, not by any means. And I have seen this sort of thing happen again and again - people who were unrelated in their work, and when they went, that was the end of the work. But if we are going right on, and the Lord's work is going on and on, we must recognise this, that the vocation is a corporate vocation. It is the vocation of the church, not of individuals; only as individuals as in a related way. It is a very important thing for you to recognise. And you see you get blessing that way; you come right in; no detachment, no unrelatedness, and there is a real blessedness about it. And the Lord can in some way let you contribute to the whole, where, in a personal way, you make no contribution at all. In an unrelated

way, you would not mean anything; at any rate, the Lord is not putting His seal upon that. He will, if you come right into oneness with all the rest.

And so we go back to our Old Testament illustration. The people found their inspiration, and the Lord's blessing upon them, as they regarded everything as a part of the whole, and saw all the time, the whole, and lived for the whole. And you live for the whole! If the local company is where the Lord has put you, live for it, work for it, not for yourself, but for it. But even so, as a local company, don't just work for your ends; have the whole view of God's church. And you will find that the Lord's blessing is there. There may be difficulties, but the Lord will stand by you. And there is something that would not be there if you just became a little company here in a corner by yourselves, living for yourselves; turned in on yourselves. No! Have this great vision of God's purpose.

Well now, these are a few things about the life of the Spirit - this Divine character of things in this dispensation. We started from within, the Spirit within doing His work, working out in relation to others; the Spirit of unity; the Spirit of purpose; the Spirit of vocation; embracing the whole church of God, the whole instrument of His eternal purpose.

Now I suggest you go back to Romans 8 and read it once more, fragment by fragment, very carefully, and say, as you ought in all your Bible reading, read it, and say: What is it that it says? And, what does that say to me? Not just, what does it say in the Bible? But what does that say to me? How do I get involved in that? And I think you will find that that chapter will take on new meaning, new light, and new values, because as I have said, it is the link. You have come in; you were out, but you have come in. Where are you going? Well, the end of this chapter is conformity to the image of His Son; that is where you are going. How? By the Spirit within, and living in the Spirit.