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As it Was in the Beginning

by T. Austin-Sparks

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The Holy Spirit and God's Beginnings

"...After that he [Jesus] had given commandment through the Holy Ghost unto the apostles... ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost... ye shall receive power, when the Holy Ghost is come upon you... it was needful that the scripture should be fulfilled, which the Holy Ghost spake before by the mouth of David..." (Acts 1:2,5,8,16).

In the first chapter of Acts, the Holy Spirit is mentioned four times. To get the right value of that, we must remember when it was that Luke wrote this book. He wrote it when the Apostle Paul was coming to the end of his life and was in prison in Rome. At that time Christianity was already beginning to change its character, for many things were creeping into it that did not really belong to it. There were changes both in doctrine and in practice. You see this clearly when you read Paul's letters to Timothy, written from the prison, for they were written to try to put things right again.

The Change in Christianity

It was, therefore, when Christianity was changing its character that Luke wrote this book called the 'Acts of the Apostles'. I do not know who gave it this name, but I am sure Luke did not. If he had given a title to this book, he might have called it 'the Acts of the Holy Ghost'. He - the Holy Spirit - is mentioned four times in the first chapter alone; and, if you look right through the book, you will see how very many references are made to Him. It is the book of the Holy Spirit, and Luke wrote it to point out that, at the very beginning of the Church's history, everything was of the Spirit. But when he wrote it, men were already beginning to bring in their own teachings and practices and were changing the original things which had been of the Spirit into the things of man. God wanted no

change; He wanted all to be of His Spirit, both then and now.

In Europe and in the Western world Christianity has very much changed its character from what it was at the beginning. It has had a long tradition, and it has become all very mixed. There are all sorts of teachings, which are said to be Christian teachings, and there are a great many things which contradict one another and yet are called 'Christian'. One section of Christianity says this is what you should teach, and another contradicts it and says something quite different. One section says that this is how you should do things, and another says that that is quite wrong and there is another way. There are hundreds of different kinds of 'Christianity'. Do you think the Holy Spirit is like that? Do you think that He has many different minds about things? No, He has not even two minds about things, let alone a hundred different minds.

The important thing for us is to know what it was like at the beginning. So we are going to try to see something of what it was like then, for it is always necessary to have a proper foundation. If that is not laid, sooner or later the building will change its shape or collapse.

God's Beginnings and the Spirit

(a) In the Old Testament

At the beginning, then, everything was of the Holy Spirit. And, when you think about it, all God's beginnings have been of His Spirit. That is where you begin in the Bible. It says: "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was waste and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep: and the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" (Gen. 1:1,2). Why did the Spirit brood? Because God was going to make a new beginning; He was going to bring a new world into existence, and the Holy Spirit was His instrument for doing this. That is the first beginning that we have in the Bible.

We move on a little way in the Word, and we find that God has decided to make another new beginning. We find a people in Egypt, whom God has decided to bring out, in order to form a people for Himself. How does He bring them out? You remember the pillar of cloud and fire - the one before to lead them out, and the other behind to protect their rear. That pillar is a type of the Holy Spirit. It is by Him that we are led out to become the Lord's people, and it is by Him that we are separated from the world. And then the same Holy Spirit, in the pillar, led them through the Red Sea. The Apostle Paul says: "Our fathers... were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea" (1 Cor. 10:2). And then he says: "In one Spirit were we all baptized into one body" (1 Cor. 12:13). So we see that the Holy Spirit made this new nation, and in doing so was the Executive of another new beginning of God.

Then the day came when the Lord gave Moses the pattern of the Tabernacle, and Moses came down with it from the Mount; and we read that, in order to make everything for it, certain men were filled with the Holy Spirit. Bezalel and Oholiab were filled with the Spirit to make all manner of work. This Tabernacle was a fresh movement of God.

The building of the Temple was yet another new movement of God; and of David it was said at the time: "the pattern... that he had by the spirit" (1 Chron. 28:12). So here the Holy Spirit initiated things again. In the Old Testament God did everything by the Holy Spirit, although these new beginnings were only types and figures of what was yet to come.

(b) In the New Testament

Then we pass over into the New Testament, and here we leave types and come to realities, and the

greatest reality of all is the Lord Jesus Himself. His very coming into the world was by the Holy Spirit. The angel said to Mary: "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Most High shall overshadow thee..." (Luke 1:35). Jesus was born through the Holy Ghost. Then, 30 years after He had come into the world by the power of the Holy Spirit, He came to the river Jordan. Now He was going to take up the great work for which He had come and which He would accomplish during the next three-and-a-half years. It was there at Jordan, when He was baptized, that the Holy Spirit came upon Him. And in this book of Acts, from which we are reading, we have these words: "Jesus of Nazareth... God anointed him with the Holy Ghost and with power: who went about doing good, and healing all that were oppressed of the devil; for God was with him" (10:38). So the Lord Jesus not only was born of the Holy Spirit but did His work by the Spirit. Then He went to the Cross, and we are told that He "through the eternal Spirit offered himself... unto God" (Heb. 9:14). So it was also by the Spirit that Jesus gave Himself on the Cross. Lastly, we read in Romans 8:11 of "the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead", implying that it is by the Holy Spirit that resurrection takes place. That is the history of Jesus.

Then we come to the second chapter of the Acts, where the Church is brought into being, and we find that this great vessel of God, purposed through all eternity, was born of the Holy Spirit. On the day of Pentecost, the Church was brought into being by the Holy Spirit, and what had been true of its Head, now became true of the Body. And it was not only born, but was also anointed of the Holy Ghost for its work, and the whole book tells us of the Holy Spirit doing God's work through the Church.

We have one more thing to say. We come to the end of the Bible, the book of the Revelation, and here the Lord is doing yet the next thing. Things had gone wrong with the Church and with the new churches, and the Lord is calling them back to their first love. Seven times over He says: "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith to the churches..." (chapters 2 and 3). You see it is the Holy Spirit trying to bring the Lord's people back to things as they were at the beginning. I am trying to impress you from the whole Word of God with the truth that at the beginning everything is by the Spirit. Nothing originates with man. And we see from the book of the Revelation that God wants the final state of things to be just as it was at the commencement.

Power Through the Holy Spirit

Now, if you are a true Christian, according to God's original intention, you are a person indwelt by the Holy Spirit. And when I say that, I am saying one of the most important things that it is possible to say to anyone. It is a tremendous thing for the Spirit of God to be in us, for the Holy Spirit is none other than the Lord Himself. What immense things are possible if the Lord Himself is inside!

Now let us look at the book of the Acts again. What was the first thing that it was said would happen to the disciples when the Holy Spirit came upon them? "Ye shall receive power, when the Holy Spirit is come upon you: and ye shall be my witnesses... unto the uttermost part of the earth" (1:8). When you think of it, that was a very wonderful thing. Look back just a little way. Jesus was standing in the judgment hall, and most of His disciples had run away and left Him. Peter, perhaps thinking that he would not be recognised, slipped down into the courtyard below. I don't know whether it really was a cold night, but, for one reason or another, Peter was cold; indeed, I think he was shivering. There came a girl and said to him: 'I have seen you with that man, Jesus', and then, turning to others who were standing by, she told them that she had seen him with the Lord Jesus as one of His disciples. But Peter emphatically denied this, insisting that he had not been a disciple. A little later someone else came and asked him if he had not been a follower of Jesus, and again, still shivering, he denied it. Later still, he was asked the same question a third time, and again he said that he had not known

Jesus. You see, Peter was shivering for his very life. He was afraid that he also might be crucified, and so he denied his beloved Lord three times.

Now comes this word: "Ye shall receive power... and ye shall be my witnesses..." A tremendous change was to take place in Peter. Instead of being afraid to be known as one of Jesus' disciples, he was to go everywhere, beginning in Jerusalem, witnessing to the fact that he believed in Him. His testimony was to be that the One whom they had crucified had risen (Acts 2:23,24). Everywhere they went they were going to glory in the Lord Jesus. It would not matter to them now whether they were killed for it or not. They rejoiced "to suffer... for the Name" (Acts 5:41). That is what the Holy Spirit can do, and that is how it was at the beginning. Go through the book and see what the Holy Spirit did in those days.

Teaching Through the Holy Spirit

But there is another very important thing that we want to mention. John became the oldest of the apostles. When all the others had gone to the Lord, he wrote his Letters. James had been killed, Peter had been crucified (so tradition says), and the others had all passed on. But John lived on, and as an old man, about 90 years old, he wrote the Letters which are called 'The Epistles of John'. Do you see how he began the first of these? "That which was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we beheld, and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life..." (1:1). That was what John wanted to declare to them. John was wanting to bring things back to the same state as they were in the beginning. And then he says this: "the anointing which ye received of him abideth in you, and ye need not that anyone teach you; but as his anointing teacheth you concerning all things, and is true, and is no lie, and even as it taught you, ye abide in him" (2:27).

Do you not think that this is a very wonderful thing? The apostle John says that the Holy Spirit who is in us can teach us everything. He did not mean that we could do without Christian teachers. But if you look at the context, you will see that what John meant was this. Christianity had got into such a confused state that the Christians did not seem to know what was right and what was wrong. One teacher said one thing and another something else, and no one seemed to know whom to follow. How were they to get over that? The Holy Spirit was in them, and He was able to tell them what was right.

It often troubles me that there are so many people, claiming to be born again, who can say wrong and unkind things about other Christians and never have a bad time about it. Can you? Do you ever have to go to the Lord and ask Him what you have done to grieve Him? If you can do or say unkind things and not have a bad time, I wonder whether the Holy Spirit is in you.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Truth, and He will not suffer us to tell untruths without letting us know it. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Love, and He will not let us be unloving. And that is true of everything else about the Lord. We ought not to need someone else to say to us that a thing is wrong: the Spirit should be checking us within.

So Jesus said: "When he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he shall guide you into all the truth... He shall take of mine and declare it unto you" (John 16:13,14). What does this mean? The Holy Spirit will say to us: 'That is what the Lord Jesus is like. You let Me make you like that.' How important it is, then, to have the Holy Spirit. You make sure that He is within, and that you trust and obey Him and walk with Him.

Much more might be said, but that is enough for now. We have seen how it was at the beginning. Will you ask the Lord to make you a Christian like those at the beginning? The Lord wants the end to be as it was then. So He says: "Be not drunken with wine... but be filled with the Spirit" (Eph. 5:18).