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Christianity - A Process of Transformation

by T. Austin-Sparks

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Reading: 1 Corinthians 2.

"We... are transformed into the same image"
(that is: 'We pass from one form to another')
2 Corinthians 3:18.

As I have moved about amongst Christians in many parts of this world, and in many situations, one thing has been growing upon me more and more strongly. In the presence of a great deal of confusion amongst Christians and many complications in Christianity, the feeling has become stronger and stronger that the need is for Christians really to know what Christianity is, and to know what it is that they are in as Christians. That sounds, perhaps, rather drastic, but I am quite sure that a very great deal of the trouble - and I think all agree that there is a good deal of trouble in Christianity generally - is due to a failure really to understand what Christianity is. It may seem strange that I should speak to you, mostly experienced and mature Christians, about the true nature of Christianity. Well, if you feel that it is presumptuous and hardly called for, be patient, and I think that before we get very far you will feel as I do: that although we know a good deal about Christianity as it is taught in the New Testament, we are very often in difficulty ourselves for the very simple (or profound) reason that we have not really grasped the meaning of what we are in. So often, when distressed as to some situation, and perplexed that it should have come about, I have found that that is just what the Word has said would happen.

May I say to you (and I am sure you will agree after a moment's thought) that the major part of the New Testament, by which I mean all these Letters which make up the larger section of the New Testament, is all bearing upon this one thing: to make Christians understand what Christianity is. If

that is true, and all these Letters *were* to Christians, surely we have to conclude that even New Testament Christians needed Christianity explained to them, and even then there was this necessity of just defining the real nature of that into which they had come.

Begin with the Letter to the Romans. Was that necessary for Christians? It was written to Christians, but what was it written for? To put them right in the matter of Christianity! Apparently those people were not quite clear in their position, in their lives and in their hearts as to the implications of that into which they had come by faith in Jesus Christ.

Proceed, as we are going to do, into the Letters to the Corinthians, and what are they? Set over against a background of real confusion and contradiction in Corinth, those Letters were written really to try to make the Christians understand what Christianity really is. And so on and on through the New Testament that is the object; that we and all who believe in the Lord Jesus should really have a clear understanding of what this is, of the meaning of the name we bear, and the meaning of that which we believe and into which we have come by the grace of God. We can gather it all up in this simple statement: that the whole Christian life is an education as to what Christianity is. Is that true? Do you not sometimes stand in the presence of some situation, some difficulty, some trial, some complication, some perplexity, some experience, and say: 'What does it all mean? I am a Christian. I have put my faith and trust in the Lord Jesus. I am His, but I don't understand what it all means. Why this experience? Why am I going this way? Why has this come my way? Why is my life such as it is? These many things are so full of mystery and perplexity. What is it that I have got into? Is this Christianity? Is this really what I have to expect and accept? If so, I need understanding, and enlightenment, and I need help as a Christian, for this thing is often beyond me altogether.'

Well, that is the setting - but is that true? If there is anyone who has never been that way, who has never had a moment like that, and whose path has been so nice and smooth, with everything so right and well adjusted and without any kind of trouble, I will excuse you if you like to read no further, for I have nothing to say to you.

Well now, what is the point on which these words in 2 Corinthians 3:18 are focused? "We are transformed...", and it is the present active tense: 'We are being transformed'; 'We are in a process of transformation, passing from one form to another.' There is a sense in which that fragment, that condensed verse put into those few words, touches the heart of the whole New Testament and explains everything.

Having said that, we come back to this second chapter of the first Letter to the Corinthians. This Letter (as indeed are all the Letters, but this is a very good example) is built around two contrasted words, and they are in this second chapter. Those two contrasted words describe two different types of humanity, two different manhoods, and between the two, firmly and squarely the Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ is planted. Look at the chapter again in the light of that last statement! "When I came unto you... *determined* to know nothing among *you* save Jesus Christ, and him crucified", and everything after that rests upon that distinction between these two types which the Cross divides and says: 'That belongs to one category of human beings and this belongs to another category of human beings.' There is a cleavage cut by the Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ between those two which separates them and makes them two different species of mankind. That truth follows right through this Letter. Read it through with this in your mind. The Apostle here speaks about a foundation and a building. He says: "Let each man take heed how he buildeth thereon. For other foundation can no man lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ", and then he drives the wedge of the Cross right into the superstructure and speaks of one kind of work or works, which are the product of one type of man, or Christian, and another kind of work, or works, which are the

product of another kind. The first will go up in flames and will never be found in eternity. It has gone for ever. The second will abide. It will abide the fire of judgment and the test of time, and be found in the ultimate structure, or building of God.

You see, Paul is applying this principle of the divide between two kinds of Christian people, and to the two kinds of work, or fruits, from each respectively, and the building, he says, as to its eternal value, will be determined by who is producing it, by what kind of man, or manhood, is producing it. Which of the two is producing this building? Think about this! These are not non-Christians. What an immense amount is being built upon Christ that is going up in smoke! Every man's work will be tried by fire, and its real value and its endurance will be determined by and will depend upon where it comes from, that is, from which of these two types of manhood.

Now you are wondering what the two words are which define the two types of manhood. Read the chapter: "the natural man... he that is spiritual." There are the two words: the natural and the spiritual *Christians*. They are not unconverted people, not non-Christians. Is it necessary for me to put in all the detail to confirm and ratify what I am saying? May I remind you that the Apostle Paul had been in Corinth for two whole years with these people! I do not know what you think, but if you had the Apostle Paul going in and out for two whole years, you would have plenty of ground for consideration! He *was* there amongst them for two whole years, going in and out, teaching them probably every day, and then he went away for five years. Then he heard things which were reported to him by the household of Chloe. I wish everyone would do what the Apostle did! He did not take the report without investigating it. He got the report and then immediately despatched a reliable messenger to investigate, either to find that the thing was not true or to find that it was so. The messenger sent and came back, saying: 'It is all true, and worse than the report.' The deterioration in five years!

You are perhaps startled and shocked by that, and will say: 'Can it be?' Well, remember the messages to the seven churches in Asia in the Revelation, and how all those churches began. There were wonderful things in those churches at the beginning. Read the story of the beginning of the church in Ephesus, and what a story it is! Against such tremendous antagonism and hostility those people came out clearly, and they brought all their magic books, of which the price is given (and that represented a tremendous amount in human values!), and piled them up in the open street, or it may have been the market square, or some open place, and set them all aflame. That is a thoroughgoing division! But where is that church in the Revelation? "Thou didst leave thy First love. Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent" (Revelation 2:4-5). What can have happened? Well, I put that in by way of emphasising this possibility, at least, of declension. Why in Corinth, why in Ephesus, and why in the others that decline? Come back to the two men, the two men instead of one man, the two men instead of each individual. It is not a dividing of a company into this category and that category, but the two things in a person. You know, we are all, if we are the Lord's, in some measure natural and spiritual. Do you agree with that? The question is not whether we are altogether perfect and there is no more of the natural in us. That is not the point. The point is: Who is dominating and governing? Which of the two, the natural or the spiritual? Here in Corinth, as we see by the Letter, the natural man was in control in the men and in the women and had taken ascendancy over the spiritual man.

The two words, then, are 'natural' - and you do not need that I should tell you that the Greek word is 'soulical' - and 'spiritual'; the man of soul and the man of spirit always in conflict. Who is going to have the upper hand, the mastery, in every one of us? The two are in each person.

Intellectualism

Now what is this natural category, this natural species? Look at the Letter again. First of all, the dominance, ascendancy, control of intellectualism, the wisdom of this world. That is the thing that is being marked and underscored as a part of the trouble in Corinth; the control of intellectualism, the natural reason, the natural mind, the idea that you are going to solve the problems of life along intellectual lines. Will you tell me that that is not a peril of Christianity today? Why, it is everywhere! It shouts at you from the religious press. You may not read so much of it, but it is my business to be familiar with what is happening in the Christian theological world, and I tell you, friends, that as I read certain theological magazines I find *death*. They are wearisome to the spirit. All this terrific effort to solve the problems of Christianity by the human intellect; the research, argument, discussion and debate, theses, etc.; philosophical Christianity trying to solve spiritual problems; what a weariness it is! I have to put these papers down sometimes! I cannot finish them, for they are so dead, so utterly lifeless. And that sort of thing is everywhere. It is thought that if you go to our seats and seminaries of learning with a clever brain, able to put out a convincing argument, you are going to save souls. There never was a greater fallacy!

This Letter to the Corinthians says that. Read this second chapter again and you will find that Paul is saying that. Paul was an educated man, so much so that for two thousand years the best scholars have found him defeating them, and they have not mastered him yet! Come to the religious bookshops and look at the shelves on the exposition of the New Testament, and you will find that Paul predominates. I got a book by one of our leading professors of theology in the universities and it was called *A Portrait of Peter*. This man, with all his learning, set out to give us a portrait of Peter. I opened the book and found that the first few pages were wholly occupied with Paul! He could not get to Peter because Paul was in the way, and the issue of his attempt was: 'Well, Peter was a great man, but Paul was very much greater!' Yes, this man Paul was an educated man, an intellectual man, a learned man. You cannot discredit Paul along that line at all, for he will beat you every time in that realm - but listen! 'You Corinthians, when I came to you I came not with excellency of speech or of wisdom, but in fear and in much trembling. I had determined that I would know nothing amongst you intellectual Corinthians save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified.' What was Paul's conclusion? 'It is no use, however much I may have of the schools, whatever I may know, however I might be able to argue with the Corinthians or the Athenians on Mars Hill, I will get nowhere along that line with a spiritual situation like this. I have made up my mind about that.' It is part of the natural man to think that you are going to be able to build up something by intellectual, scholastic, academic acumen. The fact is that what intellect can build up, intellect can pull down!

Powerism

Then look at this prominent word: power. It is there in the chapter: wisdom... power; and at Corinth there was a worshipping of natural power, ability to conquer by natural strength. You can call it 'powerism', for it was an 'ism' there. Crush by your superior strength, impose something forceful, mighty, upon people, and you will win. Only be strong enough and you can solve all the problems and change all the situations. 'Powerism' is the natural man's idea of how it is going to be done.

Emotionalism

Then emotionalism has a large place with these Corinthians. Going to capture, captivate and master, and gain your end by force of emotion stirring up people's feelings, playing upon them, working upon them until they make an almost hysterical response. If you do that well and thoroughly you will get some Christians! The Apostle says: 'Not at all!' It is evident that these Corinthians were very emotional people.

Foolishness

What does the Apostle put over against these three aspects of the natural man? Over against wisdom he puts 'foolishness'. In the first chapter he speaks of "the foolishness of the preaching". You find that 'foolishness' was a great thing with the Apostle Paul! "We are fools for Christ's sake" (1 Corinthians 4:10). What did he mean? Well, he did not mean: 'Be simpletons!', which is what we immediately take to be the meaning of being foolish. What Paul meant by foolishness was the denial that intellectualism could find out God. 'The princes of this world, and the wisdom of this world did not find out God', said Paul, 'and they could not find Him out. They could not find out anything to do with God.' "The natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: and he cannot know them." Foolishness is the denial that all the wisdom and all the philosophy of the Greeks there in Corinth, where they boasted of this thing so much, could get through the barrier to find God; and that all this power of mind and will projected and asserted in any way whatever will come up against the barrier and not get through, will not find God, nor the things of God. It is all written off as foolishness when the quest for God is pursued along that line. How foolish it is! And Paul gives a wonderful, almost startling, example of this: "God's wisdom... which none of the rulers of this world knoweth: for had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." There is not much sense in that wisdom, is there? Not much logic or philosophy in that!

So Paul puts what he calls 'foolishness' over against their wisdom, meaning a positive denial registered by the Cross of the Lord Jesus that mere intellectualism can find God and the things of God. It cannot, for the natural man cannot!

Weakness

Over against the powerism of this mentality of the natural man, the Apostle almost glories in using the word 'weakness'. He says even that Christ was crucified through weakness, and he is always speaking about, and glorying in, his own weakness. What does he mean? The denial that this kind of human force, assertiveness, can achieve anything in the spiritual world. What a building we are tearing down!

You know, that has been the test of man right from the beginning. Was it not the test of Abraham to let go even of what God had given him in Isaac? The test of this man's real spirituality was the ability to let go. Was it true of Jacob? Was he not a man of tenacity, of determination, a man who would get what he wanted at any price, at the cost of anyone else's convenience and wellbeing? Was that not the issue of Peniel, or Jabbok? "I will not let thee go!" That is Jacob! He had been like that all his life, holding on tenaciously to what he wanted, what he had or what he wanted to have. But the finger of God touched the hollow of his thigh, and after that you can see that he is a cringing man! See how he meets his brother Esau!

You are not, whether you are Abraham or Jacob or any of the others whom we might mention, going to get through with God fully and finally by your own natural determination and tenacity. One of the great lessons of the Christian life is to learn how to let go to God. Oh, all the exhortation to be strong in the Lord, to endure, to acquit you like men and be strong, does not mean with this natural strength. It is another kind of strength, and a very different kind, a strength which is only seen by our ability to let other people sometimes have their way, to get what they are after and set us at naught. They hold, grip, maintain things in their hands to our disadvantage, and our real strength is in our weakness. The Apostle Paul put this into words. Read the second chapter of the Letter to the Philippians: "Christ Jesus, who, being in the form or God, counted it not a prize to be on equality with

God, but emptied himself, taking the form of a bondservant... becoming obedient, even unto death, yea, the death of the cross." Well, has it proved to be the right thing? 'We are being changed...' Do you see the point now?

Balance

So, over against intellectualism - foolishness; over against powerism - weakness; over against emotionalism - what? The denial that the quest, the craving, the pursuit of sensationalism will get you there. For I believe that was the heart of these Corinthians' lust, their excessive desire, their outreach of soul for spiritual gifts. It is impressive that it is to the Corinthians, far more than to any other church in the New Testament, that so much is said about spiritual gifts. These demonstrations, this display, these things that you can see and glory in because you can see them, are all out of sensationalism. I am quite sure, from what we read, that if you had gone into those gatherings in Corinth you would have seen some hysterical behaviour as they made these spiritual gifts, as *they* thought, the ground and nature of their spirituality - and they are the most unspiritual church of all. So over against unbalance, lopsidedness in the Christian Church, there is need of balance.

Do you notice one characteristic of these Christians, one defect which is written so clearly and so largely here in the Letter? There is a lack of the power of spiritual discernment, the spiritual perception, the spiritual intuition which warns us: 'Go steady! Don't be carried away! Don't be thrown off your balance! This thing may be all right in its right place and under proper control, but be careful! There is a snare in every spiritual gift, and if you make the *gift* the main thing and not the spiritual meaning of the gift, that thing, which in itself may be quite right, will lead you into trouble.' I am covering a lot of history when I say that. Perhaps some of the biggest problems with which some of us have had to deal in people have been the result of this unbalanced quest for the manifestation of the sensational aspects of Christianity.

Well, perhaps some of you are not able to understand all this, but this is the situation here in Corinth, and I am only saying this to show that there are these two orders, these two categories of what I have called species of humanity which have their residence within one shell of the human body: soul and spirit. They are there, and the Apostle writes to these same people - for the second Letter is only a continuation of the first - 'We are being changed from one form to another.' What is going on? What is the process of the Spirit of God in the believer? What is the meaning of all this that the Lord allows to come our way, this discipline, these adversities, these trials, these sufferings, these difficulties, these 'strange things' (to use Peter's words, for they are strange to us as coming from God, or being allowed by God)? What is the meaning of it all? To bring about the change, the transformation from one species to another, from one kind of humanity to another. There is something in each trial, in each adversity in the suffering, which, under the sovereignty of God, is intended by Him to make a difference in us. 'We are being transformed.'

It is certainly not wrong to have a soul! It is *that* which has to be saved. In the course of that salvation, the great lesson is how to keep the soul under the control of the spirit. This is what is meant by being 'spiritual'. This is truly "He that is spiritual".