

## The Spirit's Work in This Dispensation

### T. Austin-Sparks:

“And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth”. (John 14:16,17).

We are going to think about the dispensation of the Spirit. This is not something apart from what we have been considering hitherto. I think we shall see how this matter of the Spirit is a part of that greater vision that the Lord has been bringing before us — the Man in the glory. In our last study we were for a little time occupied with the subjective side of this matter of the Spirit — receiving the Spirit as an indwelling Person, the seal and earnest of our inheritance. We shall now look at it from the other side — the objective side of the Holy Spirit and His work.

Let me say here at once that, while the subjective side of truth is of very great importance, as a source of strength and light and help generally to the spiritual life, the objective side of revelation is usually the more joyful side. If we are feeling ourselves to be in need of more joy, I doubt whether we shall find our need supplied by more subjective occupation. Our need will be met by objective occupation — by turning outwards and viewing the Lord’s provision for us, as in Heaven and as here, altogether apart from our own inner attainment unto it. It is this matter of attainment that is the trouble with us, and so, although we may not find the same inward teaching value in the objective side, I am quite sure we shall find a great deal of inspiration and uplift as we contemplate for a little while those activities of the Holy Spirit out of His own sovereignty.

#### “The Acts” Covers the Dispensation of the Spirit

Here, then, in the passage from John that we have read, the Lord Jesus points to that event so soon to take place as He was going, the advent of the Spirit. “I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter” (or “Advocate” — neither word is an exact translation), “that he may be with you for ever (for the age), even the Spirit of truth”. He indicated an age, or, to use the other word, a dispensation — the dispensation of the Spirit. The Holy Spirit has inaugurated a dispensation and has taken charge of it. That comprehends everything. The book which goes by the title of “The Acts” — certainly only in a subsidiary way the acts of the apostles, primarily the acts of the Holy Spirit — is a book which covers the age or dispensation of the Spirit from first to last.

You may argue with me that the book only goes as far as Paul’s imprisonment and leaves him there. I repeat, it covers the whole dispensation. That will be shown quite clearly before we are through. Actually, as to time, the book only covers about thirty years. All that took place as recorded in this book was crowded into something round about thirty years. How do we arrive at that? Well, the ascension of Christ was about 33 AD and the last letter written within the compass of this book was written about 64 AD. So you see all that is here is within that brief time.

#### “The Acts” a Book of Principles

What a crowded thirty years it was! What a seed plot for a dispensation, a whole dispensation! And that is exactly what it is — a seed plot. This book of the Acts laid the foundation of the whole dispensation. The dispensation was to rise out of and upon what took place as recorded here, and so the book is a book of principles for all time. The meaning of this is that, while it is not at all necessary for the Holy Spirit, at any other time in the dispensation, to repeat Himself in exactly the same form, nevertheless He will always act on the same principle. If you read this book and see what is here, as “acts of the Holy Spirit”, you will have to come to one of two conclusions. Either that the Holy Spirit is not the same today as He was then, because the things that are recorded as the normal and ordinary happenings no longer happen. Or, that what is here embodies a principle, and whether the form of its expression is repeated or not, the principle remains intact.

Take the simple example of Ananias and Sapphira and their sin against the Holy Ghost. I venture to say, with very little fear of contradiction, that there are many in the church today who are guilty of a like misdemeanour, a like sin; seeking to hoodwink the Holy Spirit — forgive the word — seeking to deceive the Lord, seeking to cover up a double life. There are many who are positive contradictions to a life under the government of the Holy Spirit, whose lives are an affront to the Spirit of truth: there is a lie. But in how many cases does the same thing happen as happened with Ananias and Sapphira? I suppose we should be involved in very serious legal trouble if it did! It would not do for any Peter among us today to pick out such people, with the result that they instantly fall down dead and have to be carried out as corpses! The Holy Spirit may not do things in the same way physically, but He has established a principle that, if any Christian lives a double life, if any Christian is

living, acting, practising inconsistency, a lie to the Holy Ghost, their spiritual life is seriously at stake, and they will become corpses in a much more serious way than physically. There are a lot of “corpses” in the church— dead people— because of something that is an affront to the Holy Spirit. We cannot continue to deceive the Holy Spirit and at the same time maintain spiritual life. That is the principle.

So we could go through this book, indicating that it is a book of principles. We have to say all the time, “Now, are we to expect a repetition of the form of the act of the Holy Spirit in every matter, or are we to look to see the principle that is involved?” For when we find the principle, and lay hold of it, we find that the principle works; whatever may be the external form of its working, the principle works. May that not be a key to the very difficult subject of the gift of tongues? It is there. Are we to say that that manifestation is to follow in that same form, universally and invariably, throughout the whole dispensation, or are we not to conclude from the book of principles, and from the full way in which the principle was established at the beginning, that in the Spirit there is a universal spiritual language which you and I speak, and we understand one another in that language of the Spirit— not necessarily literally in a tongue; that Pentecost sees the triumph over Babel— the destruction of that cause of division— in a spiritual way, so that, in Christ, all nations and tongues and languages and peoples understand the language of the Spirit? We know we have something in common: spirit speaks with spirit. We may not speak one another’s language, but somehow there is a concord and a flowing together, and it is so often more easy, even in the spoken word, when you are spiritually one, to understand things of the Spirit than to understand natural things. There you have a principle.

So the Acts is a book of principles, and it is for us to look at it and say, “Now, what is the principle in this?” Do not let me be understood as saying that the Lord does not sometimes exactly repeat His actions— He does; but not as a normal and general rule. He has shown us, by very clear, positive examples, what His principles are, and He would say to us, “If I do not smite you dead for that lie, do not think that I condone the lie, that I am any less against the lie than I was in the fifth chapter of the book of the Acts.”

#### The Spirit Providing for the Whole Dispensation

Now, the next thing is that, in providing this book, God has provided for the whole dispensation. I said that, although its actual history according to time was gathered into about thirty years, yet this book covers the whole dispensation, and it does so by way of its provision— through that which it provides. The Holy Spirit gave in those thirty years all that which was to be the church’s life and light for the whole dispensation. That needs no argument. We should not be meditating today on the record of those thirty years, and deriving spiritual life and benefit and instruction from it, if that were not true. The Spirit provided, then, for His own full dispensation— provided Himself with what He would need right to the end of the age; and He is using it still, not acts only, but utterances. Let us then look at this work of the Spirit, this acting of the Spirit, as we have it here.

#### The Spirit Bringing the Church to Birth

First and inclusively, His act was that of bringing the foreknown and foreordained church to birth. He reached right back to the eternal counsels, right down to the hiddenness of past ages, and He brought from the eternity past and from the hiddenness of the ages the church foreknown, foreordained. Sooner or later we shall find that, in the course of this record, He gives His own explanation of that. But here is the act, bringing the church to birth. In the light of its eternity past and future, what a mighty act that was! In the light of those eternal counsels of God, in the light of the meaning and calling of the church, what a great thing it was to bring that church to birth, to bring it out into actual being on the day called the day of Pentecost. Yes, He at once reached back to those counsels before times eternal and took up the purposes and intentions of God in and through the church, and brought them into the church to which He gave birth, to which He became the Spirit of life on that day.

I said He reached down into the hiddenness of the ages. I am not one of those who hold that there is no church in the Old Testament Scriptures. I am agreed that it was not recognised; agreed that they did not see the meaning of what was going on in themselves as a people. Oh, yes, I am agreed that there was no revelation of the church in Old Testament times: but not agreed for a moment that there is no revelation of the church in the Old Testament ages to the church in this age. With the Holy Spirit’s enlightenment now, we can see all the eternal principles relative to the church hidden in the Old Testament Scriptures. They are there; we can see them now. And the New Testament uses the Old Testament Scriptures to explain and illustrate the church. Strange things are said about some of the Old Testament Scriptures, that might well be thought to be straining them, making them mean what they do not mean, unless the Holy Spirit had shown the mystery. “Mystery” simply means something that was there but hidden. You cannot hide a “nothing”, a something that does not

exist. If it says that it was hidden, it must have been there to be hidden. But now at the end of those ages it is brought to light. And so the Holy Spirit uncovered the mystery hidden from the ages or in the ages, and brought out the eternal counsels of God when, by sovereign act, He brought the church into being on that day, at that time. That was no mere happening; there was nothing casual about that: it was a sovereign act of the Spirit.

### The Spirit Directing the Church's Movements

Then we find that from that point He proceeds in the directing of the church's movements, that being the object with which He is concerned. Having brought it into being, He assumes charge of its movements. Here is a wonderful story of the sovereign activity of the Holy Spirit to make the church move—and moreover to make it move as it would not move, as it would refuse to move, as its prejudices would forbid its moving; but He sees that it does. If it does not do so spontaneously and voluntarily, it will do it under compulsion of circumstances. He has taken up this matter of directing the church's movements for the age. This obtains with the Holy Spirit as much now as it did at the beginning.

### The Spirit Ordering the Church's Constitution

Next we see Him arranging and ordering its constitution: wonderful sovereign acts in the choosing of men and the giving of ministry, gifts in persons, selecting, choosing, bringing forward. It is as though the Spirit reached out His hand, and, where men would not have looked, where men were afraid, fearful, put His hand on this one and on that one; and they had to come forward, they had to come into place, and they had to be taken into account. The Spirit has said so; the Spirit is doing this: you cannot refuse Saul of Tarsus and keep him out, however bad his record is.

In other cases He is ordering the constitution of the church. He is seen giving the gifts of the ascended Lord and establishing the functions by means of those personal gifts. It is a matter for the Holy Spirit what ministry men fulfil in the church. It is not for us to select our ministry, either its kind or its place; it is not for us to choose what we are going to be in the work of God; it is not for us to say what kind of ministry we are going to engage in: "I am going to be an evangelist"; "I am going to be an apostle" (if you like you can use the word "missionary" in its place—it is the same word in another language); "I am going to be a pastor, a teacher". That is not given to us at all, thank God; that is with the Holy Spirit.

And every other gift and function is the Holy Spirit's matter, entirely in His sovereign hands, and that is a thing set forth here. Would to God that men would keep close to this book of principles and not try to do that for which they are not qualified, and to which they are not called, by the Holy Spirit. There are many misfits; many have to give up because they find the Lord is not taking them through, is not with them in it. There are many who are trying to do that for which the Lord never called them. It works too the other way: there are many who are not doing, simply because they do not feel qualified to do so. They have not recognised the principle that it is not on the basis of any ability of our own at all, but by the Holy Spirit. He can take up the most unlikely and make functionaries or functions in the church. Both negatively and positively this whole matter is seen here to be a matter of the Holy Spirit's sovereign ordering of the constitution of the church.

### The Spirit's Sovereign Use of Every Agency

Then, further, we see the Holy Spirit using all agencies in relation to the purpose of the dispensation. This is grand—this is where I think objective contemplation is so inspiring and helpful. Would to God we had a more ready apprehension or grasp of this: the sovereignty of the Holy Spirit, not only in the church through this dispensation, but as wide, as far, as all-embracing as the Throne of the exalted Lord Jesus. And here you see Him using all agencies, heavenly agencies. In this book you have a record of angelic activities: the ministry of angels co-operating with the Holy Spirit. In the letter to the Hebrews, we are told that we are come to "innumerable hosts of angels" (12:22). "Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to do service for the sake of them that shall inherit salvation?" (1:14).

Now see one beautiful little example of co-operation between angels and the Holy Spirit. It is in the tenth chapter of Acts—the record of Peter on the housetop in one part of the country, and the sheet let down from heaven, and Cornelius in another place, 35 miles away, seeking the Lord for light. Peter is a man who knows the Holy Spirit: therefore the Spirit can speak to Peter. But Cornelius is not yet in the dispensation of the Spirit experimentally. He has not come into the realm of receiving the Spirit yet. That is coming soon, that will not be long: in three days it will happen, but not yet. Therefore an angel comes to him. He cannot understand the Spirit yet, but he can understand angels. A beautiful co-operation. But do not think that the Holy Spirit is confined to spiritual people, or that spiritual people have only the Holy Spirit. They may have both the Holy Spirit and

angels, for Paul, who certainly knew what it was for the Spirit to speak to him, was able to say: "There stood by me this night an angel of the God whose I am, whom also I serve, saying, Fear not, Paul" (Acts 27:23,24). But here, in this incident of Peter, is a heavenly system at work in co-operation with the Holy Spirit, and this is soon to happen again and again. My point is this, that the Holy Spirit has all agencies of a celestial order at His service, co-operating with Him; all heavenly resources are at His command.

Then we also see how the Holy Spirit is making use of earthly agencies, people and things— very often of those that are inimical, unsympathetic, hostile. He just uses them, that is all. And behind them there is the sub-earthly, the diabolical. Oh, what a record of forces of evil at work this book contains: the spiritual hosts of wickedness, the adversary himself, working through things, working through nature, working through people. What is the Holy Spirit doing? He is just using them. They mean it for evil; He makes it work for good. Of course, that is easily said. In actual experience, we do not always look at it like that. It is the last thing that we do, when we are up against some terrific position of the enemy, to say, "That is all right! This is splendid! The Holy Spirit is going to turn this to glorious account!" We do not do that. But this book is a record of the sovereignty of the Spirit, using all agencies, heavenly, earthly and sub-earthly, unto the purpose of His dispensation. He has taken charge. Is that not helpful? That is what I mean by objective apprehension.

#### The Spirit's Provision in the Matter of Revelation

Next, we see the inspirational work of the Holy Spirit making provision for the whole dispensation in the matter of the revelation of the church—the church's nature, the church's vocation and the church's destiny. The Holy Spirit has taken up this matter and is here seen giving progressive instruction, by inspiration, as to what this thing is that has been brought in by birth on the day of Pentecost— what is its vocation, what is its destiny.

The progressive aspect of this fact is a most helpful one. We probably know that, although the letters of the New Testament are arranged in our Bibles in a certain order, this is not the order in which they were written. The order in which the Spirit has sovereignly arranged them for us is the progressive spiritual order, the right spiritual order. For students of the New Testament, and for merely informative or academic purposes, it is quite helpful to have the New Testament in the chronological order. You can actually buy a New Testament bound up in the order in which the letters were written. The first is Thessalonians, and so on. But the Holy Spirit has had a say in our having it in the order in which we do have it. It is quite clear. You cannot get anywhere until you have got Romans. Everything else will wait until what we have in Romans is established as the beginning, the very genesis, of the new creation. And it is quite as much in order to have Thessalonians at the end, its chief theme being the coming of the Lord. And if you look you see that each letter as we have it, represents one step further than the last. It is in the progress of things— spiritual progress. You would not want to have Ephesians before Corinthians. It would be terrible if, after reading Ephesians and Colossians, we then had to drop right down to Corinthians— that awful contradiction; but, with the letters in the order in which we have them, we say, "Well, here is Corinthians, and this is not how it ought to be: we must get out of this on to higher ground!"

So the Holy Spirit has brought about this order, given it to us by His sovereignty as a progressive revelation of the church's nature, of the church's vocation and of the church's destiny. For the whole dispensation He inspired the providing of this light, this truth, this revelation of God for the church. Men of God wrote "as they were moved by the Holy Spirit", and there is far more in that than I have been able to point out. The most enlightening, the most instructive matter is to see how the Holy Spirit puts things in order— to see the order in which He puts things as He gives His revelation.

#### The Spirit Relates Everything to Christ

Finally, for the present, we see in this book of Acts how the Holy Spirit relates everything to Christ. While He, the Spirit, is the worker, while all that is here is the expression of His energy, His activity, He is keeping Christ in view all the time. He is not speaking of Himself; He is keeping Christ in view and relating everything to Christ. He is relating to Christ in a threefold way.

Firstly, eternally. He makes it perfectly clear that God's purposes, His vast, great, wonderful purposes, were all settled in His Son before ever this world was. Before this world was, He summed up all things in Christ, He centred all things in Christ. The Holy Spirit makes it perfectly clear that all things relate to Christ eternally.

Secondly, incarnately. What is before is subsequent. It is all heading up to that great consummation, and all things are gathered together in Christ, related to Christ incarnately. (This is the point at which I think this falls into line with our first two meditations in this series— the Man, the Son of Man, and how this Man gathers up

all things into Himself.) He is made man, becomes man. The Holy Spirit keeps the Man in view — “the Man Christ Jesus”. In the seventeenth chapter of this very book of Acts we have: “He hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by the man whom he hath ordained” (verse 31). There is another fragment very much like it in the tenth chapter (verse 42). The Holy Spirit is keeping everything related to Christ incarnately as the Son of Man, God’s Man.

And then, in the third place, exaltedly: for what the Holy Spirit is always careful to point out is that God raised Him, God exalted Him, God gave Him the place of supreme exaltation and glory — “crowned Him with glory and honour” — and everything is related to Him as there. He it was who filled Stephen on that memorable occasion, when Stephen, “being full of the Holy Spirit, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God” (Acts 7:55). By the Holy Spirit Stephen saw Christ exalted at God’s right hand. Everything is related to Him as exalted. The Holy Spirit quotes the Psalms — the inspired Psalms. How the Holy Spirit brings in all that He Himself has before provided! See how He uses them through inspired men. He draws in the Psalms concerning the exaltation of the Lord Jesus: “Sit thou on my right hand, till I make thine enemies the footstool of thy feet” (Heb. 1:13). “Therefore being at the right hand of God exalted...” (Acts 2:33). That is the work of the Holy Spirit, to keep everything related to God’s central object and interest and concern — His own Son.

#### Our Responsibility in Relation to the Spirit’s Sovereignty

All this robs us of every bit of ground for being introspective. All that has been said is a provision for rejoicing. If this is true, what a wonderful confidence it brings — this contemplation of divine sovereignty. And yet remember that there is another line running parallel — the line of our responsibility in relation to the Spirit’s sovereignty. The Spirit says very often, Go here, go there, do this, do that. Then responsibility comes in to respond, to obey, to be in subjection to the Spirit, to be completely yielded to Him; and that is all embraced in one principle at work all the way through. The Spirit’s ground of sovereign activity, so far as the church is concerned, is the ground of the cross — the application of the principle of the cross all the time. Unless the Lord’s children, even these apostles, will allow a further working of the cross, the Holy Spirit, as far as they are concerned, is unable to go on. He must bypass them, He must take up some other instrument.

Yes, responsibility is there, even in sovereignty. Do not let us, in our joy of contemplating the sovereignty of the Lord, think, Oh well, we can sit down and it does not matter — He will do it in spite of everything. So far as the church is concerned, and that means you and me, there is a responsibility running alongside of the sovereignty of the Spirit: the call for yieldedness which is the principle of the cross, the setting aside and putting to death of self-will, self-interest, self-assertiveness and everything that is of self. All that is of self must go under the power of the cross, and the Spirit goes on (and only goes on, where we are concerned) on that ground — the ground of the cross. That is how He makes the cross work for us unto glory: whereas those outside the church, who do not accept the cross, find that the cross is made to work for their undoing, their destruction. Herod knew all about the cross, but he refused to be subject to it. He set himself and his own interests in opposition to it, and he was destroyed out of hand. For its enemies, the working of the cross is death, but for us it brings to glory, by the sovereignty of the Spirit.