

The Shaking of the Foundations by Paul Tillich

Paul Tillich is generally considered one of the century's outstanding and influential thinkers. After teaching theology and philosophy at various German universities, he came to the United States in 1933. For many years he was Professor of Philosophical Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, then University Professor at Harvard University. His books include Systematic Theology; The Courage to Be; Dynamics of Faith; Love, Power and Justice; Morality and Beyond; and Theology of Culture. This book was published by Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, in 1955 and is out of print. This material was prepared for Religion Online by John Bushell.

Chapter 16: The Witness of the Spirit to the Spirit

There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus hath made me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit. For they that are after the flesh do mind the things of the flesh; but they that are after the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God. But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his. And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of him that raised up Jesus from the dead dwell in you, he that raised up Christ from the dead shall also quicken your mortal bodies by his Spirit that dwelleth in you. Therefore, brethren, we are debtors, not to the flesh, to live after the flesh. For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God. For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the spirit of adoption, whereby we say, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God. Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities: for we know not what we should pray for as we ought: but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. And he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is in the mind of the spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God . ROMANS 8:1-16, 26-27.

This sounds difficult to our modern ears, strange and almost unintelligible. Words like "spirit" and "flesh", "sin" and "law", "life" and "death", in their various combinations, appear to us as philosophical abstractions, rather than as concrete descriptions of Christian experience. For Paul, however, they express the most real and the most concrete experience of his life. This eighth chapter of his letter to the Christians in Rome is like a hymn praising, in ecstatic words, the new reality which has appeared to him, which was revealed in history and had transformed his whole existence. Paul calls this new being "Christ", in so far as it has first become visible in Jesus the Christ. And he calls it "Spirit", in so far as it is a reality in the spirit of every Christian,

and in the spirit which constitutes the assembly of Christians in every place and time. Both names designate the same reality. Christ is the Spirit, and the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. A Christian is one who participates in this new reality, that is, one who has the Spirit. "If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his." To be a Christian means to have the Spirit, and any description of Christianity must be a description of the manifestations of the Spirit. Let us follow the description that Paul gives us of the Spirit; and let us compare our own experience with it. In so doing we may discover both how far away we are from the experience of Paul, and, at the same time, how similar our experience is to his. These strange words of his may reveal more to us about our lives than anything our contemporaries may think and write about the nature of man, his life and his destiny.

"The Spirit Himself beareth witness with our spirit that we are the children of God." These words imply that our spirit is unable to give us such assurance. Our spirit, that is, our natural mind, our thought, our will, our emotions, the whole of our interior life, cannot give us the certainty that we are the children of God. This does not mean that Paul depreciates human nature and spirit. On the contrary, in speaking of our spirit, he acknowledges the creativity of man, his similarity to God Who is Spirit, his ability to be free himself, and to liberate all nature, from vanity and the bondage of corruption by his own liberation. "For we are also his offspring", he told the Athenians in his famous speech on the Areopagus, thus confirming their own philosophers. Paul thinks as highly of man as any modern could do. A famous Renaissance philosopher describes, in lyrical words, the position of man at the center of nature, his infinity and creativity, the unity and fulfillment in him of all natural powers. Paul would agree. But Paul knew something more than the Greek philosophers knew, something which the Renaissance philosophers had forgotten, namely, that human spirit is bound to human flesh, and that human flesh is hostile to God.

"Human flesh" does not mean human body. Man's body, according to Paul, can become a temple of the Spirit. But "human flesh" means the natural human inclinations, man's desires, his needs, his way of thinking, the aim of his will, the character of his feeling, in so far as it is separated from the Spirit and is hostile to it. "Flesh" is the distortion of human nature, the abuse of its creativity, the abuse, first of all, of its infinity, in the service of its unlimited desire and its unlimited will to power. This desire, of which we know something through recent psychology, and this will to power, of which we have learned much from modern sociology, are rooted in our individual existence in time and space, in body and flesh. This is what Paul calls the power of distorted flesh.

He describes the will of flesh with a profundity which cannot be equaled. "The carnal mind (mind of the flesh) is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, *neither indeed can be!*" If we receive a law which we must acknowledge and which, on the other hand, we cannot fulfill, our soul inevitably develops hatred against him who has given the law. The father, being the representative of the law which stands against the child's desire, necessarily becomes the object of the child's unconscious hate, which may become conscious and may appear with tremendous force. This would not be so if the law against its unordered and unrestricted desire were felt by the child to be arbitrary and unjustified. But it is felt to be justified. It has become a part of the child's "super-ego", as recent psychology would say; or, in the language of traditional ethics, it has become a demand of his conscience. Because the law given by the father is good, and the child cannot help recognizing this, and therefore because the law is inescapable, the child must hate the father; for he seems to be the cause of the torturing split in the child's soul. That is the situation of man before God. The natural man hates God and regards Him as the enemy, because He represents for man the law which he cannot reach, against which he struggles, and which, at the same time, he must acknowledge as good and true. There is no difference, at this point, between the theist and the atheist. Atheism is only a form of enmity against God, namely, that God Who represents the law, and, with the law, the split and the despair and the meaninglessness of our existence. The atheist as well as the theist hates to be confronted with what he ought to be, with the ultimate meaning and good which he cannot deny and yet which he cannot reach. The atheist gives other names to God, Whom he hates, but he cannot escape Him, any more than he can escape his hatred of Him. This is the reason Paul does not say: "Our own spirit witnesses to us that we are

the children of God." Our own spirit only witnesses that we are his enemies!

Always when Christianity speaks of God and of our loving God in our daily life, it should remember that. The majesty of God is challenged, when we make Him the loving Father before we have recognized Him as the condemning law, Whom we hate in the depths of our hearts.

"The Spirit beareth witness with our spirit that we are the children of God." Something new has come, a new reality, a new being, a Spirit distinguished from our spirit, yet able to make itself understood to our spirit, beyond us and yet in us. The whole message of Christianity is contained in this statement. Christianity overcomes law and despair by the certainty that we are the children of God. There is nothing higher than this. For although we are in the flesh and under the law and in the cleavage of our existence, we are, at the same time, in the Spirit and in the fulfillment and unity with the ultimate meaning of our life. This paradox, for Paul, is the astonishing and, humanly speaking, the *incredible* content of Christianity. This certainty gave him the impulse to preach his message to the whole world, and to conquer it. It gave him the power to break with his caste and his nation, and to take upon himself an abundant amount of suffering and struggle, and finally, martyrdom. Christ has overcome the law, the system of commands which makes us slaves because we cannot escape it, and which throws us into despair because it makes us enemies of our own destiny and our own ultimate good. Having this certainty that we are the children of God means, for Paul, "having the Spirit." Out of this certainty follows everything that makes Christian existence what it is. First of all, it gives us the power to cry, "Abba, Father!" that is, the power to pray the Lord's prayer. Only he who has the Spirit has the power to say "Father" to God.

Everybody can *say* the Lord's prayer, and it is recited millions and millions of times every day. But how many of those who say it have received the power to *pray* it? The fatherhood of God, which is the greatest and most incredible concept of Christianity, has become one of the most usual and insignificant phrases of daily life. Christianity has forgotten that in every invocation of God as Father the enmity against God must be overcome, the ecstatic certainty of our childhood must be given by the Spirit. Many of those outside Christianity know more about it than those within it. They know how paradoxical and impossible it is to call God "Father." But where it happens that man has gained freedom, "the spirit of bondage" to fear is overcome by "the spirit of adoption." When a child has a moment that we could call a moment of grace, he suddenly does the good freely, without command, and more than had been commanded; happiness glows in his face. He is balanced within himself, without enmity, and is full of love. Bondage and fear have disappeared; obedience has ceased to be obedience and has become free inclination; ego and super-ego are united. This is the liberty of the children of God, liberty from the law, and because from the law, also from the condemnation to despair.

Those who have the Spirit walk not after the flesh but after the Spirit. The power of infinite desire and unlimited will to power is broken. It is not extinguished; the hunger and thirst for life remain. But when, for us, the Spirit is present, desire is transformed into love and will to power into justice. In the great chapter on love in First Corinthians, Paul makes it clear that love is the fruit of the Spirit, and that there is no love without the Spirit. Love is not a matter of law. As long as it is commanded, it does not exist. Neither is it a matter of sentimental emotion. It is impossible for the natural man; and it is ecstatic in its appearance, like every gift of the Spirit.

And finally, Spirit is life. "To be carnally minded is death." There is a man of our time who discovered the truth of this profound statement. Sigmund Freud recognized that at the root of our infinite desire lies the will to death. The individual, feeling the impossibility of fulfilling his desire, wants to rid himself of it by losing himself as an individual. Death is inevitable, but it is also chosen. Not only *must* we die, we also *want* to die, "for to be carnally minded is death."

"But," continues Paul, "to be spiritually minded is life." Spirit is life, creative life, as the ancient hymn, *Veni*

Creator Spiritus, declares. The word "spirit" has largely disappeared from our daily language and entirely from our scientific terminology. It is replaced by "reason." But reason argues about what it has received; it analyzes life and often kills life. It is not life itself; it is without creative power. But the Spirit is power as well as reason, uniting and transcending them. It is creative life. Neither power alone, nor reason alone, creates the works of art and poetry, of philosophy and politics; the Spirit creates them individually and universally, powerful and full of reason at the same time. In every great human work we admire the inexhaustible depth of its individual and incomparable character, the power of something which happens but once and cannot be repeated and that, nevertheless, is visible to century after century, universal and accessible in every period.

No argument of reason can give certainty. The finite cannot argue for the infinite; it cannot reach God and it can never reach its own eternity. But there are two certainties. One dwells in every soul which knows about itself. It is the certainty which the law imposes that no life and no death, no courage and no flight, can liberate us from the command to be what we ought to be and the impossibility to be so, the condemnation of which is despair. The eternity of despair encompasses us in the moment that we are conscious of our witness to the law. The other certainty dwells in those who have the Spirit; they are beyond their own finiteness and they cannot use arguments, for their eternity is present to them. It is not a matter of a future life after death; it is the convincing presence of the Spirit Who is Life, beyond life and death.

In the story of Pentecost, the Spirit of Christ shows its creativity in both directions, the individual and universal. Each disciple receives the fiery tongue that is the new creative Spirit. Members of all nations, separated by their different tongues, understand each other in this New Spirit, which creates a new peace, beyond the cleavages of Babel, the peace of the Church. Furthermore, for Paul, the Spirit is eternal life. It is obvious that the certainty that we are children of God, that we are united with the eternal meaning of our life, is either itself eternal or is nothing. There is no rational argument for the immortality of our souls. Here and now we are encompassed in the never-ending despair brought on us by the law. Here and now we are encompassed in the eternal and inexhaustible life created by the Spirit, which witnesses to the fact that we are the children of God.

But someone may say: "I have not received this witness. I have not experienced the Spirit of which Paul speaks. I am not Christian in this sense." Listen to Paul's reply. Perhaps it is the most puzzling and mysterious of all his sayings. "Likewise the Spirit also helpeth our infirmities. For we know not what we should pray for as we ought; but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered; and he that searcheth the hearts knoweth what is the mind of the Spirit, because he maketh intercession for the saints according to the will of God." Paul recognizes the fact that usually we are possessed by weakness which makes the experience of the Spirit and the right prayer impossible. But he tells us that in these periods we must not believe that the Spirit is far from us. It is within us, although not experienced by us. Our sighing in the depth of our souls, which we are not able to articulate, is taken by God to be the work of the Spirit within us. To the man who longs for God and cannot find Him; to the man who wants to be acknowledged by God and cannot even believe that He is; to the man who is striving for a new and imperishable meaning of his life and cannot discover it, to this man Paul speaks. We are each such a man. Just in this situation, where the Spirit is far from our consciousness, where we are unable to pray or to experience any meaning in life, the Spirit is working quietly in the depth of our souls. In the moment when we feel separated from God, meaningless in our lives, and condemned to despair, we are not left alone. The Spirit, sighing and longing in us and with us, represents us. It manifests what we really are. In feeling this against feeling, in believing this against belief, in knowing this against knowledge, we, like Paul, possess all. Those outside that experience possess nothing. Paul, in spite of the boldness of his faith and the depth of his mysticism, is most human, most realistic, nearer to those who are weak than to those who are strong. He knows that we, with all other creatures, are in the stage of expectation, longing and suffering with all animals and flowers, with the oceans and winds. The soundless mourning of these other creatures echoes the soundless longing of the human soul. Paul knows that what we are to be has not yet appeared. And yet he has

written his triumphant and ecstatic letter on Spirit and Life. It is not his spirit which inspired him to write those words, but rather the Spirit which has witnessed to his spirit and which witnesses to our spirits that we are the children of God.

Viewed 399691 times.