

From the Individual to the Corporate

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon emphasizes the transition from individual faith to a corporate body of believers united under Christ as the Shepherd.

Scripture: John 10:14-15, Ephesians 4:4

Topics: "The Role of the Holy Spirit", "Corporate Identity in Christ"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the transition from individual faith to a corporate body of believers in John 10, highlighting that true spiritual life is found in community rather than isolation. He explains that while individuals are important, God's purpose is to create a unified body where Christ is the rightful Shepherd, leading His elect company out of legalism into grace. The sermon stresses the necessity of recognizing the movement of the Holy Spirit towards this corporate expression of faith, which is essential for experiencing the fullness of God's blessings. Sparks also notes that this corporate identity is marked by a shared life in Christ, where believers know His voice and are united in purpose and mission. Ultimately, he calls for a deeper understanding of the corporate nature of the Church as part of God's eternal purpose.

Transcript

READING: John 10.

At this point in the Gospel of John we find ourselves in the presence of a distinct transition. Up to this point, everything has been individual; a long series of individuals or individual cases have been in view. At this point a change takes place: we pass from what is individual to what is collective and corporate. Henceforth what will be in view will be a company. It will be collective, in the sense that all the parts represented in the first half of the Gospel will be brought together and found gathered into this company. It will be corporate, because a common life is the basis of everything.

We make a distinction between what is collective and what is corporate. Note this distinction. A congregation is not necessarily a body. It is collective, because a lot of units are brought together into one place; but a body presupposes an organic oneness, on the basis of life. Life is here clearly seen to be the basis of what is corporate: as in the case of the flock, where the members share a common life; or as in the case of the vine, which is an organism where all the many parts are made a unity by the one life. And so we find that, from this point onward, all that has hitherto been said about life as related to individuals, is now reproduced in principle in a corporate company, a corporate body, in the sense of many being one because of one life.

Chapter 10 introduces the characteristics of what is corporate, and specifically the characteristics of this corporate body or company which is in view.

Let us underline the fact of the transition. If the Holy Spirit is to be true to the Divine mind, there is bound to come a point in the history of any local company when if He is allowed to have a free way quite spontaneously things pass from what is just individual to what is corporate. It is a spontaneous and inevitable movement, because it is perfectly clear from all the Scriptures that God has purposed to realize His full design, not in separate, unrelated parts, but in a corporate whole, on the basis of life. So I repeat, if the Spirit of God is in charge, He will be consistent with the Divine mind, and, sooner or later, where He is really in charge of a company, things must inevitably pass from mere individualism to the corporate. It is not announced at this point in the Gospel that that is the nature of the change, but it is perfectly clear, and it is something that we should take account of for ourselves.

We are very fond of this chapter; we should be very sorry to lose John 10. We should also be very sorry to lose John 15. These chapters on the sheep and the vine are very precious portions of God's Word. But let us take note that the values contained in these chapters are corporate values, and can only be enjoyed by the individual in a corporate relationship. That will be borne out as we go on.

What I am trying to emphasize and make clear at this point is that this matter is in the hands of the Holy Spirit, who is so consistent with the thought of God as to bring about quite naturally a spontaneous transition from the individual to the corporate at some point in our spiritual course. To fail to recognize that, and to fail to be in that movement of the Spirit, means to be left with just the spiritual measure that an individual can have, which is far short of what the Body can have; and I think this explains a very great deal of the limitation in literally multitudes of very devoted and earnest Christians, who are just individual Christians, living individual lives, trying to be individuals devoted to the Lord. There is limitation in that, and so, noting the movement of the Spirit of God in this matter, we should be intent upon knowing what the characteristics of that corporate life and Body are.

Another thing about the matter presented in chapter 10 is that, in common with all new beginnings of God, it contains the germs of all future development. I think you are aware of the principle that, when God takes a fresh step, in that fresh step there is inherent, in principle and in germ form, all that will eventually develop. We will not stay to illustrate this from other passages, but it can be seen here, and you will be able to follow it as we go on. Suffice it to say that all that is going to come out later on, not only in John's Gospel but in the whole revelation of the New Testament, will be found in a few basic principles in this very chapter.

The Rightful Shepherd

The first characteristic, then, of this corporate company, now introduced, is Christ, the authoritative Shepherd. It is a question of who is the rightful shepherd, who has the right to be the shepherd, who stands in that position and relationship by God's own appointment, approval and seal. Whom has the Father sealed? You notice that word. "Him the Father, even God, hath sealed" (John 6:27). "Sanctified" (John 10:36) and "sealed." It is the question of the authority and right to be the shepherd. His own words about Himself are not just that He is good, in the sense of moral goodness. They go further than that. They declare that, on the basis of that goodness of character, He is the true Shepherd.

We could very much enlarge upon Christ's right on the basis of His character, His nature, to be the shepherd. For the present we must note that, before there can be a real spiritual company, in the good of

God's blessing in fulness, Christ must be in His place as rightful Shepherd, rightful Lord, the One in whom there must be reposed absolute confidence, about whose position there must be no question.

Antagonism to the Shepherd and His Flock

That stands so strikingly in contrast to the atmosphere surrounding Him in the chapter which we have read. We note the steadily intensifying atmosphere of question as to His right, antagonism to His claims, refusal to acknowledge Him. In the end of the chapter is a company who "believed on him there," who repudiated the repudiators, who stood against the whole atmosphere charged with questions about Him. You see, this antagonism is a very strong thing. It is something malicious, malignant, very strongly evil, as to the place of the Lord Jesus, His title, His rights; and it is over against this that such a company will have to stand. If you and I are to be found in all that it means to be really members of that elect Body, we are going to be in a relatedness which has the whole malignant force of hell set against it, because it is standing for the rights of the Lord Jesus.

From the beginning, Satan and his whole company have been set against the rights of the Lord Jesus. Satan is not against us as Christians, he is not against us in ourselves. We do not meet this antagonism simply because we have become members of the Christian fold. You can be that - you can be Christians in name, in title, in profession, and never meet the fury of hell; but stand in this relatedness of one life on the ground of the absolute sovereign Lordship, authority and right of Jesus Christ, and you are involved in that which He found Himself. There will be plenty of stones taken up; there will be plenty done to bring to an end that testimony. This corporate company will meet much more even than the individuals as such. The individuals will find that they have to encounter very much more when they stand on the ground of the oneness of the Body of Christ than they would if they stood on an independent, individualistic ground. So that the very first characteristic of this corporate expression of Christ and His life is the testimony that the rights are all His, that He alone occupies this place of Shepherd.

An Elect Company

The next thing which becomes so clear in this chapter, which I hinted at just now, is that this is an elect company. We are now, of course, able to read this chapter in the light of the fullest revelation of the truth, brought us later in the New Testament particularly through Paul, although not through him alone, that the Church is an elect Body. While the Lord Jesus speaks of Himself as having been sanctified and sealed by the Father, He speaks in similar language of the sheep. How often it is from this point onward that the Lord Jesus is found to be speaking of "those whom the Father hath given me," "those whom thou gavest me"; and here in this chapter we read: "I know mine own," "I know them," "mine own know me." There is something about them that marks them off as known of God, foreknown of God, and He distinctly says to these other people that the reason they do not believe, they do not hear and they do not know His voice, is because they are not of His sheep. If they were His sheep, they would know His voice, but they are not, and that by their own exercise of will. "Ye will not come unto me that ye might have life."

Two Folds

The next thing here is the division which immediately appears and broadens when He is in His place, and when He is securing that elect company. There are here in this chapter, mentioned or implied, two folds, and He says quite clearly that He came to lead His flock out of one fold and that He is making another fold. It does not require a great deal of insight to recognize what the two folds are. There is a little fragment which is the key to it. "God sent forth his Son... born under the law... that he might redeem them which

were under the law" (Gal. 4:4,5). That is only saying, in other words, "that He might get them out of that fold, that legalistic fold." The whole atmosphere of this chapter speaks of the legalistic fold the fold of Judaism, where it is law. This is in keeping with the introduction to this Gospel: "The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (John 1:17). The Lord saw a fold - and what a fold it was, and what shepherds they were! Firstly, they had made the sheep that were really His their own. They therefore regarded Him as a "sheepstealer." Then the effect of their relationship to the sheep was to bring them into spiritual bondage, to limit their spiritual growth, and to make them servants of a tradition, an earthly and man-controlled system, rather than the Lord's free people. It would not be a bit helpful to pursue that thought, but it is very like some forms of Christianity as we know them. That is the kind of fold - hard, legalistic, selfish. Christ came to lead His sheep out from that fold, and to bring them into another - the fold of grace, liberty, life, life more abundant, and all the full heavenly purpose for the Church.

So the two folds are, clearly, the fold of merely traditional religion, and the fold of spiritual truth, reality and life in Christ.

The Way from the Fold of Law to the Fold of Grace

What is the way out and the way in? The way out and the way in is Christ's death. "I lay down my life for the sheep." Here it is not so much the sin question that is to the fore, although that lies, of course, at the root of everything. He was "born under the law." His death was to extricate from that fold, that system, that deadly thing that was against them "the bond written in ordinances that was against us" (Col. 2:14). He laid down His life for the sheep. His death was the way out. The whole of the New Testament afterward bears down upon this, that it is by the death of the Lord Jesus that we are delivered from the bondage of the law - that law which is constantly and eternally battering us with our own sin, breaking and shattering us with our own state. His death is the way out; His resurrection is the way in. "Who according to his great mercy begat us again unto a living hope by the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, unto an inheritance incorruptible" (1 Pet. 1:3,4). So deliverance by the death of Christ is one of the characteristics of the company. They have come into the good and value of the delivering death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, with all its blessing and enlargement. They stand on that ground.

Let me return to something I said a little earlier, that while individuals, of course, come that way and they must so come - we must recognize that death with the Lord Jesus, and resurrection in union with Him, sees the end of all individualism. God's intention is to bring to an end what is merely individual. There must be an individual entering in, but for it to remain an individual thing is contrary to the meaning of the death of Christ. Right from this time onward, it is seen in this Gospel that the full blessing lies on the far side of Jordan. In the Old Testament, the Israelites were a much more integrated people on the other side of the Jordan than they were before; and when you get on the far side of the death of Christ you are immediately found as a part of a people, and not just as individuals.

So it is in the New Testament. You come to Colossians and Ephesians, or to what is represented by those letters. You find immediately that you are "raised together with him." It is the Church that is in view; you have left merely individual ground, you are now on corporate ground. Christ's death is intended to bring that about. If we have not apprehended that, we are still in the limitation which a merely individual life must know. It is very important for us to recognize that.

It is all a matter of God's purpose. What is God's purpose? What is revealed to be "the eternal purpose... purposed in Christ Jesus"? You will find always that the Scriptures demand the Church for the eternal

purpose; the whole Body which gives Christ the vessel for His collective and corporate expression. That is the way of the eternal purpose, and it is on resurrection ground that we come into it. Therefore that which is only individualistic goes out with the death of Christ, and in the resurrection of Christ it is found no more in the thought of God. Christ's death is the way out; Christ's resurrection is the way in. That is the principle here enunciated.

"They Know My Voice"

The next thing is that, because of the relationship which we have set forth Christ in unquestioned and undisputed authority; because they have been brought out through His death and resurrection from the realm of law to the realm of grace, that is, from mere profession to the realm of life ("I give unto them eternal life"; "I came that they may have life and may have it abundantly"); because of their life-relationship with Him, through His death and resurrection, there is an inward "something" about this company, an inward correspondence with Him. "My sheep hear my voice"; "they know my voice." You cannot explain that in language. It is something that goes beyond language, it is something that can only be known in fact. It is one of those mysteries of John. ("How can a man be born when he is old?" - 3:4. "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" - 6:52.) But it is fact.

I have often recounted an experience I had once at a place in the Near East, where, from various directions, shepherds were coming to a well with their mixture of sheep and goats following them. As they came to the well, all the sheep and goats got mixed up. I stood a little way off, watching this. I saw them all merge, and saw the shepherds get together and have a talk. I thought, "This is a glorious mix-up! What is going to happen? how will they be able to get their flocks sorted out?" So I waited until the shepherds had finished their talk and had decided it was time to move off. One shepherd simply walked right away. He got right away up on the hill and turned round and started calling a strange note - I could not reproduce the sound. And those sheep began to open up, and his own flock just went up there to him, and all the rest were left. Each shepherd had his own note and call. The sheep knew the voice of their shepherd. I thought it was marvelous how those sheep should know. Well, they had learned to know. "The sheep hear his voice: and he calleth his own sheep by name... and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice. And a stranger will they not follow." If I had tried to imitate that shepherd, I should have got no response at all; but they knew him.

There is something of an inward correspondence which we know by the Spirit. We know when the Holy Spirit speaks to us. And we usually know when the stranger speaks; we detect something strange, something foreign, about it; it does not answer nor correspond to the Lord in us; we are not happy about it. It is a mystical something, but very real. That is the basis of spiritual intelligence, and it is the point I am stressing. Those who are of this company, of this corporate Body, have an inward correspondence with the Lord, a basic spiritual intelligence whereby they know Him. They do not always have to be told by others, "This is what the Lord wants," or "That is not what the Lord wants." They may be helped by counsel; but there is a place, a position, of walking with the Lord where we do not have to be told, where we know, even if it is by making mistakes - we know by the reaction of the Spirit of the Lord in us. The point is that there is a spiritual intelligence which is essential to the purpose of God in the company He is securing in relation to His Son.

These are principles; they are not expounded, but they are there in this tenth chapter of John's Gospel. It is a wonderful chapter, and what we have said is only a very small part of its content. But let us seek to grasp these tremendous basic laws of God's eternal purpose into which we are called in Christ, and to lay

them to heart and ask the Lord to work them into us, so that they are not merely things in the Scripture or in an address; they are realities in our spiritual life.

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