

The Church - Transition From the Natural to the Spiritual

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the Church's transition from a natural existence to a spiritual community rooted in Christ's resurrection and the governance of the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: Zechariah 13:7, Matthew 26:31, John 14:27, John 20:22, Acts 20:28, Romans 15:33, 1 Corinthians 15:45, Colossians 1:20, Hebrews 2:11-13, Hebrews 13:20

Topics: "Spiritual Transformation", "The Church"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks emphasizes the transition of the Church from a natural to a spiritual entity, highlighting that true believers are those disillusioned with worldly hopes and ambitions, now gathered on a heavenly basis. He explains that the Church serves as a witness to the Resurrection of Christ, embodying a spiritual corporate body that thrives on the peace established by His blood. The Holy Spirit governs the Church, empowering it as a new creation, while faith is essential for true fellowship with the risen Lord. Ultimately, the Church is portrayed as a family, united under the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of believers, reflecting the divine nature of Christ.

Transcript

After having read this chapter of John, we should immediately add Hebrews 13:20:

"Now the God of peace, who brought again from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant, even our Lord Jesus, make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is well-pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ...."

We are nearly at the end of this record, and therefore we would expect to find its message and content embodied in some kind of definite, inclusive summary. And so it is.

In accordance with prophecy, the Shepherd has been smitten and the sheep have been scattered (Zechariah 13:7). That scattering meant that they had been "offended." "All ye shall be offended in me this night" (Matthew 26:31). The offense, or stumbling, was due to a false expectation, a wrong basis of hope.

This was mainly the expectation and hope of something temporal, earthly, tangible, in which they would have personal interest and position.

That was all shattered and lay in ruins. The "sheep" presented a sorry picture while He lay in the tomb!

But the Great Shepherd has returned, and in this chapter we see Him reconstituting everything on the eternal basis. First He moves hither and thither, regathering to Himself the scattered and bewildered sheep.

Then He takes pains to reassure them that it is He Himself who is alive. But, while the same, there is a difference; a constitutional change, in which there is a combination of reality and mystery; a new kind of Man; humanity, but not as we know it.

He lingers long - forty days - to establish His identity, to leave them in no doubt as to His reality; and yet to leave the indelible impression of His otherness.

All this undoubtedly was meant to give meaning to the Church of which they were the nucleus. This chapter is a beautiful and concrete presentation of what the Church is in principle, according to God's mind.

(1) The Church - Transition from the Natural to the Spiritual

The Church is the aggregate of those -

(a) who have been completely disillusioned as to this world and as to any hope for it as it is: who have come to an end of all selfish and personal ambitions and interests in the Kingdom of God: who have known that disintegration in themselves which comes from trusting in their own sufficiency; and

(b) who have been gathered up and integrated upon a completely other basis - a spiritual and heavenly one.

(2) The Church - A Witness to the Resurrection

The Church is an exclusive witness to the Resurrection of Christ in its own experience, and in its very constitution. He confined, and always does confine, the revelation of Himself as the risen Lord to the "heirs of salvation"; it is never given to the world in general.

The Church is constituted a spiritually corporate company or "Body," a heavenly people (by His ascending to the Father as Head, verse 17) - very real but yet inscrutable. There is reality and mystery in the true Church. This mystery or inscrutability is its strength. Remove it and seek to be popular, and you destroy its authority. This is not mystery in the sense of being "mysterious," abstruse, occult, and so on, but possessing a power, a vitality, an endurance, a wisdom, a life, which is not of this creation but of another.

(3) The Church - Peace Through His Blood

The Church is constituted upon the basis of the peace which was made by the blood of His Cross (verses 19,21,26; Col. 1:20). "The God of peace... brought... from the dead the great shepherd... by the blood of the eternal covenant."

That title "the God of peace" is used by Paul in relation to the whole matter of righteousness upon which justification rests (Rom. 15:33, 16:20). In the same great argument he speaks of the Church in its corporate oneness (12:4,5). The very existence of the Church demands this great value and effect of the blood. It rests upon an eternal covenant, made and sealed thereby. There is no Church of God apart from

that which He purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28). His Church rests upon His peace - the peace of reconciliation. There should be no conflict or controversy between the Church and God, or God and the Church. The Church should always mean the place of peace for all its members. So the repeated announcement of peace by our Lord in this chapter carries with it the great and fundamental work of His Cross, and is not just a nice word to allay fears and agitation at His appearances. It links back with chapter 14.

(4) The Church and the Government of the Holy Spirit

Then the risen Lord establishes the fact that the Holy Spirit will be the governing reality in the Church for this age (verse 22).

This "breathing" on them was a symbolic act.

Firstly it symbolized a new creation, the "one new man," indwelt and energized by a new life, the life peculiar to this resurrection body - "raised together with Him." Then it was a prospective securing unto the great receiving. If the real "receiving" of the Holy Spirit took place on the day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts 1:8, then this of which we read here was not an actual receiving, but rather a potential or prospective appointment which in due course would carry with it the authority of verse 23.

The main point is that the Church, the New Creation, the Body of Christ, is indwelt, energized, actuated and endowed by the Holy Spirit. This is not an official, but a spiritual thing. It is not ecclesiastical, political, or traditional, but vital, dynamic, and of a nature, not a system.

(5) The Church - Fellowship Through Faith

The section which brings Thomas so much into view sets forth the fact that the fullness of blessing by fellowship with the risen Lord is only, but surely, on the basis of faith. It is possible to be in and of the Church, where the fullness of Christ is to be found, and yet to be almost like an outsider. It is possible to be doctrinally or positionally of the Body corporate, and yet for all practical purposes, enjoyment and blessedness to be like an isolated and unrelated unit going a lonely way.

This is the lot of all doubters who have a question.

Faith brings into fellowship, life, experience, and worship!

(6) The Church - A Family

Finally. The most beautiful character of the Church, which lifts it out of all cold formalism, legalistic death and stiffness, and mere ecclesiasticism, is indicated by the family terms here used - "Father," "brethren" (verse 17). Here again we are taken to the letter to the Hebrews, 2:11-13,17; 3:1.

The Church is a family. "The last Adam" is "a life-giving Spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45). He begets sons and daughters through the travail of his soul" (Isaiah 53:11).

He makes His "brethren" the "congregation" in the midst of which He "sings" (Heb. 2:12).

All this leads to the testimony to His Divine Person. The main evidence of His being "the Christ, the Son of God" (verses 30,31) is found in His significant (or "sign") acts in the Church, i.e. the mighty effects of His death and resurrection.

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