

# Christ and His Church Incognito

by T. Austin-Sparks

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of the incognito position of Christ and His church, where their true nature and significance are beyond human comprehension, and only God Almighty can reveal the mystery.*

**Scripture:** Matthew 5:14, Acts 4:13, Romans 8:19, 1 John 3:1

**Topics:** "Identity in Christ", "Spiritual Recognition"

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## Description

T. Austin-Sparks explores the profound truth that the world does not recognize Christ or His Church, as stated in 1 John 3:1. He emphasizes that this lack of recognition is not a loss but a significant gain, as it highlights the divine mystery and power inherent in their presence. The sermon critiques the modern church's tendency to seek worldly approval and status, which often leads to a dilution of its spiritual essence. Sparks challenges believers to embrace their identity as unacknowledged and misunderstood, living for eternal values rather than human accolades. Ultimately, he calls for a return to the original, inscrutable nature of Christianity that reflects the true power of God.

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## Transcript

"...the world knoweth us not, because it knew him not" (1 John 3:1).

In our pursuit of this enquiry into the differences between things now and as they were in the first years of Christianity let us at once make it clear that this is no idle wish to make comparisons and just leave it there. It is always a very easy and usually unprofitable thing to find and display comparisons and it is not very clever to do so.

In our quest there is one object which governs: it is to discover whether the differences represent real gain or loss.

We may find that we are led to a more than general conclusion relating to Christianity at large. The probability is that spiritual problems in the life of the individual Christian may have light thrown upon them. But we must begin with the fundamental principle and major difference. This difference is easy to see and very great indeed.

The quotation from the letter of John (alongside of which much more could be ranged) contains a categorical statement: "the world knoweth us not", and it is linked with a larger, drastic, and sweeping indictment and explanation: "because it knew him not".

This is a simple and plain statement of fact; the fact that both the Son of God and the church of God could be here in this world in closest touch with its people, with all the wonder and miracle of the divine purpose, and the world be in a state of complete inability, or disability to identify them -- "know them not".

That does not mean that the world was unaware of their presence. Very much to the contrary! The world was far from being able to ignore them. It had to take account of them. But as to their true identity and significance, the world could give no explanation. From time to time the world, which must reduce everything to a formula, a label, a name, made an attempt to confine this inscrutability within a word or phrase or epithet. It coined a term and dubbed them "Christians", or people of "the way", or a "sect". That is the way of the world. It must reduce the infinite, the eternal, to the measure of its own mind.

But the question which is vital to us is whether this incognito position was gain or loss. We beg to earnestly affirm that it was of unspeakable gain in the case of both Christ and His church that the real nature, virtue, power and significance of their presence in this world was in the very fact that there was a secret which was beyond all natural comprehension. Much as they desired that men should come by the way which would make that secret true of them also, it was just in the knowledge that a divine miracle lay at the heart of that experience that the strength of Christ and the church lay. The mystery intrigued, baffled, defeated, angered the world or made it wistful. Flesh and blood could not reveal that mystery, only God Almighty! "The world knoweth us not" was no complaint, no lament of defeat and no confession of something faulty with them. They were sorry for the world, not for themselves.

Their power lay in this fundamental difference. That the time came, all too soon, when this distinction began to be surrendered in exchange for "standing" with the world, gives the force to our question: Has the church or Christianity really gained by this exchange? Christianity now resorts to every conceivable means by which it can gain position, recognition and prestige, and in which the world can easily understand it. For its very success it must have names, titles, designations, honours, etc. Unless Christians "conform", "belong", take a name, and explain themselves, they are suspect, outsiders, and of no "standing"; no matter what their SPIRITUAL value may be. "Sect" has become an epithet, an expression of scorn, as in apostolic times. On this line Christianity has expanded, become big, but the question is pressing on many honest and serious minds as to whether the INTRINSIC value will stand comparison with that of the beginning.

Is it not impressive to see how, whenever that which had a strong, deep, rich, and effective beginning has been "accepted" by the world, especially the religious world, marks of SPIRITUAL loss show themselves? Of how many God-initiated ministries and instrumentalities this is true. From something of heaven containing a deep and costly spiritual history and possessing the dynamic and impact of the divine presence, with its later development as an "institution" standing well with men, with all its bigness and natural impressiveness, it has become a mere shadow of its origin, so far as depth and spiritual strength are concerned. There is now little or no "mystery" about it. It has nothing inscrutable and inexplicable in it. It can be mainly attributed to human ability.

Let us hasten to insert a protective word. We are NOT saying that it is a wrong thing for Christians as private persons to have EARNED honours, degrees, titles, or designations. We are aware of an ultra-exclusive movement which for fellowship, recognition, and participation at the Lord's Table demands a repudiation or relinquishing of all professional, academic, and other degrees. This we are definitely not countenancing. IN THEIR REALM these things have their place. What we are saying is, that if Christianity seeks to make these things the basis of its strength, its appeal, or its status, it has gone astray and will

resultantly suffer the loss of spiritual power. "The world knoweth us not", and any attempt to put human importance in the place of that supernatural secret will prove disastrous. When the term "institution" begins to loom large in the Christian vocabulary, it can be taken to mean that a change has taken place which is not for the better.

The challenge to many hearts is as to whether they are prepared to be misunderstood, unacknowledged, unsung and unapplauded in this world and live only for eternal values. It has been said of the apostle Paul that "he lived with eternal values only in view". Was he right?

One apostle says: "The world knoweth us not... it knew him not". Another says: "The earnest expectation of the creation waiteth for the revealing of the sons of God" (Romans 8:19). There will be some surprises when that happens -- both ways!

Only the Spirit of sonship, and those who have Him, know the sons. God has hidden them from the world. It is painful not to be recognized, because it is contrary to our nature -- as it is.

The world must see the embellishments, honours, vestments, titles, in order to take account. In the beginning it was not so. "They took knowledge of them that they had been with Jesus." There is a right way in which the world must know us, that is, know that we are here, and that is that we are something that it cannot comprehend.

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