

“The Church’s Fifth Column”

John 10:1-10

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Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn

The next paragraph of the Gospel extends to v. 30, but it is too thick, too full of important matter to take all at once. It is a section constructed of metaphors, all having to do with first-century sheep farming. You will see that there is a mixture of metaphors. First the Lord likens himself to the gate of the sheep-fold and then, later, to the shepherd himself. But there is no confusion: the points are clear and forceful.

- v.2 All of this would be familiar to John’s readers. We are probably to think of a large enclosure, away from the home itself, used perhaps by several families or by one large farm, with a watchman hired to protect the animals by guarding the gate.
- v.3 This presumes that several flocks would have been kept overnight in the same fold and that the shepherd would separate his sheep from the rest simply by calling to them. The British author, H.V. Morton, in his famous book, *In the Steps of the Master* [155], gives this account. “Early one morning I saw an extraordinary sight not far from Bethlehem. Two shepherds had evidently spent the night with their flocks in a cave. The sheep were all mixed together and the time had come for the shepherds to go in different directions. One of the shepherds stood some distance from the sheep and began to call. First one, then another, then four or five animals ran towards him; and so on until he had counted his whole flock.” In this case, notice, that some emphasis falls on the fact that the shepherd calls each sheep by name, calls them individually, one by one, and leads them out of the fold.
- v.5 This thought, that Christ’s chosen sheep inevitably follow him, will be developed later in the chapter.
- v.6 As before and as will be true later in the gospel, a statement about the misunderstanding of the people is followed in the Gospel of John by further explanation.

Now you have three different aspects of the complicated metaphor of sheep and shepherd in vv. 1-5: the gate, the shepherd who knows his sheep, and the sheep themselves, who belong to the shepherd and who know their own shepherd. Each of these metaphors is now to be expanded: the gate in vv. 7-10, the shepherd in vv. 11-18, and the sheep in vv. 26-30.

- v.7 You will see he is picking up one idea from vv. 1-5 and making a separate metaphor of it. Now there are not several flocks in one fold and there is no watchman. But the threat of thieves and robbers is still present. “I am the gate” is the third of the seven “I am” statements in John.
- v.8 Clearly the Lord is not referring to Moses and the prophets. It is a reference to the religious leadership. It is interesting that Jesus does not say that those who came before

him *were* thieves and robbers, but *are* thieves and robbers. He is speaking of his contemporaries in particular.

- v.9 George Adam Smith, the 19<sup>th</sup> century biblical scholar tells of traveling one day in the holy land and coming across a shepherd and his sheep. He fell into conversation with him and the man showed him the fold into which the sheep were led at night. It consisted of four walls, with a way in. Smith asked him, "This is where they go at night?" "Yes," said the shepherd, "and when they are in there, they are perfectly safe." "but there is no door," said Smith. "I am the door," said the shepherd. He was not a Christian man and wasn't speaking the in the language of the New Testament. He was speaking from an Arab shepherd's viewpoint. Smith looked and him and asked, "What do you mean by the door?" "When the light has gone," said the shepherd, "and all the sheep are inside, I lie in that open space, and no sheep ever goes out but across my body, and no wolf comes in unless he crosses my body; I am the door." Whether the Lord meant for his hearers to have that image in mind when he said "I am the gate" is not clear.

The single point of this extended metaphor is that Jesus is the only gate through which the sheep may go into the safety of the fold and out to the rich pasture. The thought is the same as 14:6: "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the father except through me." And he makes the point explicitly, they and they only *will be saved*.

One of the very interesting things about the Bible is the way in which different texts have been used by the Holy Spirit to speak to different people through the ages. In the margins of my Bible I have any number of notations indicating that it was such and such a text that first brought some celebrated Christian to faith in Christ or that it was this text that gave some great Christian worker his summons for life. Well, against John 10:1 I have a reference directing me to the life story of Alexander Henderson. Henderson, if you remember, was the greatest man of the Scottish church and one of the greatest men in all of Britain in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. It was to Henderson that the Scottish church owed its freedom in the middle of that tumultuous century, that period that is known in church history as "The Second Reformation."

But Alexander Henderson did not begin his life's work as a champion of the reformation and of the crown rights of Jesus Christ. He was, to put it mildly, one of a large number of Scottish pastors in those days who had neither spiritual life themselves nor the means to convey it to others. He was a lackey of the king and of a mostly unspiritual church. Indeed, his ordination to the ministry makes a most unusual story. In those days congregations had to take the ministers the bishops appointed for them, no matter if the minister had no grasp of the gospel. Henderson was appointed to be ordained and installed as the new minister of a small parish in Fife, about six miles from St. Andrews. But the folk in that parish church had embraced the reformation and had no interest in a minister who didn't understand the gospel and would not defend the cause of Christ in the land. So, they made the only protest they could. They nailed shut the doors of their church on the day appointed for Henderson's ordination. The Bishop's party had to climb through the window and the service was conducted in an empty building.

However, a few years later Henderson heard that Robert Bruce, the faithful reforming minister, was to preach in a nearby church. This was the man who had recently been cast out by the

crown from the pulpit of St. Giles, Edinburgh, the most important church in Scotland in those days. This was the man who had known John Knox and had been Andrew Melville's assistant in the long struggle between the church and the crown. Henderson wanted to hear the famous preacher for himself and so made his way to the church where Bruce was to preach. He sat in the darkest corner of the church, under the balcony. With impressive dignity Bruce gave out his text, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that entereth not by the door into the sheepfold, but climbeth up some other way, the same is a thief and a robber." Those words from John 10:1, read by the most celebrated preacher in Scotland, went home to Henderson's heart, he would later say, "like drawn swords," and became, with the rest of the sermon, the means to bringing him to true faith in Jesus Christ. He had been a man who entered the sheepfold by another route, but no longer. He was himself, such a man as Jesus was talking about in these verses, but no longer.

Now, throughout this text and as it continues further into chapter 10, the Lord Jesus distinguishes himself from false teachers, false religious leaders. This is, of course, nothing new in this Gospel or in any of the Gospels. We have already encountered the Lord's characterization of the religious leadership of his day as blind men leading blind men. We have noticed time and again their hostility to Jesus and his teaching and the Lord's daring characterization of them as men who do not know God.

But here we have this fact and this teaching on Jesus' part in the boldest relief. There are thieves and robbers among the people of God who, unlike real shepherds, have no true interest in the sheep. The Sadducees in Jesus day were wealthy men, by and large, and made a great deal of money from their control of the temple worship. In the Gospels we hear the Lord Jesus, on several occasions, denounce the scribes and Pharisees for covetousness (Luke 16:14; Mark 12:40). But, I don't think we have to think only of folk who hope to make money from the people of God. "Thieves and robbers" are all religious leaders who, for whatever reason, mislead the people, do not lead them in the one true way to God, and so betray their position as leaders of God's people.

Indeed, given the fact that man is a religious creature at his core, this assessment applies as well, in a general way, to the world's political, philosophical, and social leaders as well. How many leaders have their been who, in one way or another, have promised to bring their people to the promised land and have led them to misery, death, and despair instead. Certainly those of us who are the children of the 20<sup>th</sup> century know full well that when the world seeks salvation by its own efforts, it will learn too late that its leaders in those efforts – its Hitlers, Stalins, or Pol Pots, its social reformers and educational philosophers – will only end up plundering their property (they come 'only to steal'), ruthlessly trample human life under their feet (they come 'only to kill'), and contemptuously savage all that is valuable (they come 'only to destroy'). Verse 9 is a short history of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, is it not? As one observer put it, "Jesus is right. It is not the Christian doctrine of heaven that is the myth, but the humanist dream of utopia." [Roy Clements in Carson, 385]

But the Lord is speaking, of course, more directly of the religious leadership of the church, the Jewish church of his day and, by implication, the Christian church of any and every day. And the fact of the matter is the story of the kingdom of God in the world has been the story of its

continual subversion from within by its own leadership. The Christian ministry through the ages has been, more often than not, a fifth column, the devil's agents in God's kingdom. I would venture to say that, taken as a whole, the Christian ministry has had more thieves and robbers among its numbers than true shepherds.

Even in John Chrysostom's day, the fourth century, the great preacher was prepared to say that he did not think that many of the ministers of the church were saved.

And what is the difference between a shepherd and a thief or robber? following the Lord's mixture of metaphors, it is clear that the difference is precisely that the shepherd, the genuine caretaker of the sheep, makes sure that the sheep enter through no other way than that of the gate, Jesus Christ himself.

Now, to be sure, the Lord puts the point very generally here. The errors of the Pharisees in his day were not precisely the errors of the medieval priesthood nor those of the liberal protestant ministry in the modern era, though, to be sure, they had certain things in common. But, in one way or another, they undermined the place of Jesus Christ in the hearts and minds of God's people and the world and they made a way for people to dream of peace with God without faith in and submission to the Lord Christ as the only name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved.

Now it is relatively easy to spot some of these kinds of ministers some of the time. You may have followed the newspaper accounts a few years back of the Dallas, Texas TV and radio preacher and faith healer who was exposed by the secular press – alas the Christian press rarely can be counted on to uncover frauds in the church. He had people send in their prayer requests on printed cards that he supplied – of course, it was understood that money would accompany the requests – and these cards were sent directly to a Dallas bank. That was the P.O. Box on the envelope. The bank took out the money and threw the prayer request cards by the bushel load into the dumpster out back. The man, Robert Tilton, had for years been soaking his flock, getting fabulously rich himself by his skillful imitation of a Pentecostal faith-healer and prosperity preacher. I read not long ago, by the way, that he is back in the preaching business once again. I tell you it remains the truth today as in Jeremiah's time that the prophets and the priests are corrupt, but the people love it this way!

Then there are the pastors that deny the central truths of Holy Scripture and encourage their flocks not to believe them.

In Aberdeen, Scotland, when I was a student there and here in Tacoma, when I first arrived, there were so-called Christian ministers who could be counted on every Easter to enter the lists against the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. The local papers gaily interviewed them every year, knowing what a good story it would make, and they would say why Christians didn't have to believe that Jesus came out of the tomb, why they themselves didn't believe it, and why we were better off in the church without the albatross of having to live or die by such an unabashedly supernatural claim.

So many of the influential figures in Christian scholarship in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were of this type. Their reconstructions of the Christian faith took the form of the thoroughgoing denial of all its central doctrines and historical claims. And only occasionally did the mainstream Christian world hear someone stand up and say so, as for example, when the Swedish theologian Nels Ferré said of the existentialist theologian, Paul Tillich: “Tillich is not a Christian nor is anyone who embraces his teaching.”

But, of course, life isn't always so simple, is it? There are ministers and have always been ministers who combine what seems to be a healthy set of Christian convictions with a surprising skepticism and surrender to the spirit of the age. I think, for example, of the Scot James Denney, who died in 1917. Some of his fine books on the death of Christ have been reprinted numerous times in this century and were a staple of the early work of Inter Varsity Press. Denney was a champion of Christ's objective atonement, bearing our sins in his own body on the cross. But there were other biblical doctrines, central and vital doctrines, including even the deity of Christ, that he couldn't be counted on to proclaim with the same conviction and plain-speaking.

Sometimes this happens over the course of a man's life's work. Gerrit Berkouwer, late of the Free University of Amsterdam, was one of the most gifted Reformed theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and his early work is uniformly outstanding. But the later volumes of his great series on *Christian Dogmatics* leave much to be desired. And those who attended his classroom lectures say that, in later years, he was expressing his doubts about important parts of the faith once delivered to the saints, predictably such doctrines as divine judgment and the sovereignty of God's grace. I arrived at the Free University in 1984 after Dr. Berkouwer had retired, and in a few short years the Divinity School there had changed from being the finest Bible-believing Reformed seminary in the world to a school in which but one of the faculty members and only a few of the students were evangelical Christians who took seriously the history and the doctrine taught in the Bible. I remember conversations with a divinity student – a future Reformed minister – whom I had hired to help me learn Dutch. He was nonplussed that I thought one had to be a Christian to be saved or that one was required by God's law to restrict sexual practice to marriage.

During the years of the ministry of Alexander Whyte in Edinburgh there were a good many young men embracing the teaching that was coming from Germany. And Whyte, who was a staunch evangelical, defended them, sure that these were Christian men, devout men, who would never let their scholarly researches interfere with the authority of God's Word over the hearts of men. But, of course, by the time of Whyte's death in 1921 the Scottish church was largely dead: dead men in pulpits preaching death to dying men. The condition of that church is no better today than it was then, if not worse. Whyte himself never embraced those German views and was heard at the end of his life bemoaning the condition of the church and calling for what he called a return to Puritan preaching – “such preaching will alone rally Scotland round the pulpit” – apparently unconscious that he had had a part in the removal of the foundation for that preaching, an unshaken confidence in the divine origin of the Bible. [In I. Murray, *Diary of Kenneth MacRae*, 16n.]

And, of course, in the American protestant history the story has been the same. It has rarely been that ministers have abandoned a biblical faith all at once. Rather, they give up a piece of it at a

time until there is not enough left to sustain faith on their own part or on the part of their people. Think of the multitudes of Christian folk in Christian churches today who have never in their lives heard a searching sermon explaining and defending the plain meaning of the text of God's Word touching Christ and salvation.

And, then, there are ministers that are formally orthodox, their problems are not doctrinal *per se*, but they are lazy and incompetent and do not care for the sheep and do not take care to see to it that they pass through the only gate to eternal life.

The church Florence and I attended in Aberdeen in the mid-70s was pastored, more than a century before, by one James Kidd, a powerful preacher of Christ and godliness in a day of real spiritual muddle in the Scottish church. Once Dr. Kidd was called upon to preach at the ordination of a student in the presence of a predominantly moderate Presbytery, that is, a room full of ministers who took the middle road and didn't worry overmuch about the salvation of their people. In the sermon Dr. Kidd delivered a biting satire directed at what he took to be the typical clergyman of his day. "My young brother," he began, addressing himself to the ordinand, "you have now been set apart to the office of the holy ministry. Whatever you do, be sure that you don't overwork yourself. Why should you die before your time? There are some foolish people, as you may be aware, who go in for Sabbath schools, prayer meetings, and Bible classes; but, my beloved young brother, I counsel you carefully to avoid all that sort of nonsense!..." [Cited in Introduction to Wm Cunningham's *Historical Theology*, vol. 1, v]

Believe me, the Christian ministry has always attracted its share of lazy men. I remember a painful summer working for one. What was obvious to everyone who attended the church was that, whatever the man did with his time, he didn't spend it preparing his sermons, or caring for his people, or building his church.

I tell you this. There are many great and important differences between the views we hold in this church and, for example, those that are held by Roman Catholics and the Orthodox. We are very happy to say that God has his people in churches that we could not in good conscience attend ourselves, obliged as we are to live according to the light we have received. But, the differences between those churches would diminish mightily if they would admit one thing and one thing only: that they have ministers in their churches today and have always had a sizeable number of ministers who are thieves and robbers and not true shepherds *precisely because they have not devoted themselves to preparing the way for their people to come to Jesus Christ, to trust in him only for their salvation; precisely because they have not directed their sheep to the only gate through which to enter salvation*. But, this they do not admit even though the simplest Christian knows it is true and that multitudes of people have been allowed to live and die in those churches who have never had the absolute necessity of a living, working faith in Jesus Christ pressed home to their consciences and a credible faith in Christ made the sole basis for their welcome in the membership of the church.

You know how controversial it was for the Lord to raise this point and to declare publicly that the religious leadership of the day were no true ministers of God. They hated him for it so much that they killed him for it. And so it always has been. This reformation Sunday we are remembering a movement that began, very simply, as an attack on an unspiritual Christian

ministry. They really were – they literally were – selling salvation for money and Luther protested. And that protest, far from bringing the ministry to repentance, so infuriated the ministry of the Christian church that they sought to have Luther excommunicated and then killed. And that antagonism on the part of the settled ministry of the church was, in large part, what made the issue so clear in those days and what brought the reformers into the light regarding the gospel of God. A true minister cares for the sheep and for their salvation and so he takes pains to bring his people to a personal faith in and living connection to Jesus Christ. That hadn't been done by most ministers in the Christian church of Europe for hundreds of years!

Our Lord put his finger on a great matter when he talked about thieves and robbers among the ministers and other leaders of the church. You do not understand the landscape of Christendom, you will not understand what you see in the church here and around the world, unless and until you realize that it is populated by many men – and now, alas, also women – who have the care of souls but are betraying that care at every turn because they do not tell the people and show them and insist repeatedly and affectionately that Christ and Christ only is the way, the truth, and the life and do not help them to a true and living faith in him.

I will be the minister I ought to be to you, and Mr. DeMass also, only to the extent that Jesus Christ is everything to you and that you know him and love him unquestionably and affectionately and gratefully. As the only way to life, to heaven, and to God. There is so much of this in the Gospels. Plainly it is something the Lord wants us to know and understand.

I have this written in my Bible. I wish, for your sakes, it was more true of me.

Then grant, O Lord, mine earliest latest prayer,  
 That some fold in thy pasture be my care;  
 Where from all tumult, all ambition free,  
 Save that of winning many souls to Thee,  
 I may, unnoticed, pass my tranquil days,  
 And lead my flock in wisdom's pleasant ways;  
 And meet in bliss, when every trial's o'er,  
 The ransomed flock I loved so well before!