**VOLUME 10; CHAPTER 09 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**REGENERATION by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*Born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.*

*John 1:13*

THE PRINCIPAL AND INCLUSIVE THOUGHT OF THE TEXT IS CONTAINED in the phrase "begotten … of God." By this phrase we are ushered into the presence of the central miracle of Christianity, the first, fundamental work of the Holy Spirit. All the powers and, the wonders of Christianity proceed from this center. The new social order which ought to be established within the limits of the Christian Church, the influence on the world which the Church exerts, its message to men - of all these the power ultimately results from this initial, central, and fundamental miracle of the new birth of the individual soul. The dynamic in each case is that of the new life in the individual. That new life, mutually related in the Church, becomes the heavenly nation, and enables that nation to show forth "the excellencies of Him who called them out of the darkness into His marvellous light." That new life in the sacramental host creates the force of the Church's aggression in the world.

Therefore, although it is indeed the old, old story, and a theme most familiar in many of its aspects, it is perennially new; and the application of it can never be exhausted nor its consideration ever be out of place.

In order that we may think intelligently on all that is suggested by the phrase, I shall ask you to notice with me with some amount of care the interpolated negatives of this text, "not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man." I shall ask you, in the second place, to consider the immediate statement in all its sublime brevity, recognizing the mystery but insisting on the fact, "begotten … of God." I shall ask you, finally, to consider the instructive context, for in some senses my text is wrested from its context, not in order to forget it, but to return to it.

In the first place, then, we turn to what I have described as the interpolated negatives. A threefold negative statement breaks in on the general phrase and demands attention by the centrality of its position. These words sweep away all false ideas concerning the nature of personal Christianity, and leave the mind clear for contemplating the sublime fact itself. The theme is that of the origin of life. Christianity here is looked on properly and necessarily as life, something infinitely more than creed, something infinitely more than a cult; life, ultimately perfected in the whole Body of Christ, which is the Church; life, fundamentally realized in the individual soul. The subject is the origin of that life. In the whole text I find the answer to a question of Nicodemus. He said to Jesus, "How can a man be born when he is old?" people who criticize Nicodemus for that question, and think that it was flippant, have surely never understood the deep agony of soul out of which it proceeded. This question men must always ask when they come to any sense of God, of themselves, of sin. It is a question that suggests impossibility: "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb, and be born?" How can a man start anew untrammeled by the past? How can a man escape from the insistent, haunting pressure of the things that lie behind him in his own life? How can a man be born anew? The answer is in my text; he can be "begotten ... of God." Now all the difficulties are really suggested by these negatives: "Not of bloods, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man." In these three phrases we have a revelation of the only methods of which any man could think when he began to consider the possibility of a new beginning in his life. All man's theories concerning the origin of life are suggested by these phrases. Not of bloods, which is to say that the new, peculiar life of the Christian cannot be accounted for by the combination of anything that is material. If I may borrow a very modern phrase, this life cannot be accounted for by the fortuitous concurrence of atoms - "not of bloods." "Nor of the will of the flesh"; this life is not generated naturally, in any sense of the word. "Nor of the will of man"; its origin is not even in the rationality of humanity. That threefold line covers the whole ground of philosophic discussions on the origin of life. Within the three phrases of the inspired Word lie all the suggestions that have ever been made on the origin of any form of life. The apostolic word sweeps them all away and says, This life is not so to be accounted for.

In my text, in these negatives, I find, however, recognition of spiritual conceptions. I believe here is the answer of inspiration to sincere souls who are earnestly desiring, as was Nicodemus, something higher, nobler, earnestly desiring to escape from the bondage of the past and the paralysis of the present. How can a man be born again? Here are three ways in which it is impossible.

"Not of bloods," that is, by no mere process of nature. In that statement lie at least two suggestions: not by descent from our forebears after the flesh, and not by the evolution of anything that is homed within the material. A man begins his life again in the power of an entirely new life. In the first place, these gospels were written by Hebrews and undoubtedly were largely studied by Hebrews, and it was necessary that they should understand that this new, mystic, Christian life could not be begotten in the soul of a man by the fact of his relationship to what lay behind him, by descent, for instance, from Abraham. The truth abides. I am not a Christian because my father was a Christian. I cannot transmit my Christianity to my children. "Not of bloods." We may make our boast in our blood, and may even name it by certain colors, which seem to suggest some kind of aristocracy, but there is nothing in any blood inherently of the spirit-life, and there is nothing in any blood which secures to the man in whose veins it runs the possibility of the new birth and the new beginning.

Again, "nor of the will of the flesh." This suggests the sincere and passionate desire after the better, which expresses itself in personal effort, so that here we are taught that the new birth does not result from the determined throwing off of the evil that is within or from the persistent imitation of the good that lies without. Not by any natural force can a man enter into the new life. I am not undervaluing the attempt a man may make in his loneliness, apart from the revelation of the gospel, to master evil forces; I am not undervaluing the attempt a man may make to imitate that which is high and noble. In the final dealing of God with men I have no doubt whatever that the heathen who has never heard our gospel and has never walked in our light, but has answered the light within him, fighting against the beast within himself and climbing after the higher ideal, will have a far better chance than the man who names the name of Christ and sings the songs of the sanctuary and is content with some orthodoxy of the intellect, but has no response within his own soul and no obedience in his own character. Not thus, however, can a man be born anew.

Once again, "nor of the will of man." No decision of man generates life. Even though Christ is presented to me, and I will to believe in Him and honestly do so, it is not of my willing that I am born again. The act of my will is not that which generates new life in me. Neither can any man bestow by life on man. These negatives completely sweep everything false from beneath us, and leave us face to face with the one and only method by which the soul can be born anew and enter into the Christian life. The gateway into the Church is the gateway of a life which never comes through blood, through effort, or as the result of rational and intellectual activity; which never comes by the soul's own effort.

So we come necessarily to the central fact itself: "Begotten … of God"! We have no explanation of the process of the mystery. We must not be deterred from the consideration because that admission is properly made. That is true of all life. The methods of the generation of life are absolutely hidden. The secret of life in every realm is unfathomed today, and in spite of all scientific investigation. Life eludes analysis and definition. The mystery of the budding and blossoming flower is as profound as the mystery of the new birth of an immortal soul. Involved within your personality as you know it, apart from spiritual things, there is a mystery which is as profound as the mystery which you have to face when you hear the central Christian doctrine of the necessity for the new birth. The phrase of my text speaks of the Agent, God; and of the begetting and the beginning of new life. It is for us to consider what the phrase suggests, remembering here also that "the secret things belong unto God: but the things that are revealed belong unto us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law."

The communication of life is from God; it is new life, different in quality from the life which we have lived until we receive it; but it is life as definite and positive as any life, finding its demonstration in the results that follow its possession. The mystery of its coming none can explain. When Nicodemus asked his question, the Lord employed the simple symbol of the wind to help him to understand that he could not understand: "The wind bloweth where it listeth, and thou hearest the voice thereof, but knowest not whence it cometh, and whither it goeth; so is every one that is born of the Spirit." The thought of the text taken in its simplicity is that the life bestowed is of a new quality, different from any other life, the very life that is needed if a man is to begin again and is to realize all that in which he has previously failed. In the discourse contained in the tenth chapter of this gospel our Lord made this declaration: "I came that they may have life, and may have it abundantly." In the course of the same address He said: "I lay down my life, that I may take it again." His argument and teaching is that His life was laid down in order that that very life might be communicated to others. Again, the mystery of the process abides; but here is the declaration of the fact, and the demonstration of its accuracy to be found in the results produced. Peter, James, and John were never born again until the day of Pentecost. Until then they were disciples, the Hebrew disciples of a Hebrew Messiah, following His teaching, obeying His commands so far as they had light, naturally shrinking from His cross as the natural man forever shrinks from the cross - but pressing after Him with fine loyalty though with much trembling. In the strict sense of the word they were disciples only. They never shared His life while He was among them. They never saw with His eyes, though they saw His eyes and the love light shining from them. They never heard with His ears, though they heard His speech and were astonished. They never felt with His heart, though they loved Him and knew the warmth of His affection. There was no identification with Him in those early days. They were never born anew, until on the day of Pentecost there came the Holy Spirit, by which they were baptized into union with Christ. This union was not of a common sentiment, not a union born of a common admiration; it was a definite, positive, real, though mystical, union in life. From that baptism of the Spirit they began to live one life with Jesus Christ; He, now ascended, glorified, Man of their humanity, at the right hand of the Father; and they, on the earth, in the world, in the midst of its temptations and its sins and sorrows, burdens and responsibilities; but their life was His life, His life was their life. They were living one life with Him.

You say that is theory. No, it is a fact, demonstrated by the change in the men. Look at these disciples in the gospels, and then look at them in the Acts of the Apostles: the change is radical, and marvelous. They were changed from men, struggling, climbing, endeavoring, failing, to men new-born, living one life with Christ, mastered by love, illumined by light, doing exploits in the power of the dynamic actually communicated to them, of which they were devoid until that time. I look at them before Pentecost, and I hear them saying in the presence of the Cross and passion, the shame and suffering, Not that, Lord; that be far from Thee! I find them almost immediately after, their backs waled with rods, bruised and bleeding, and I read that they were "rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for the Name." They were new-born men, men mastered no longer by their own lives according to their first birth, but by this mystic life which did not destroy the capacities of the first birth, but fulfilled them, glorified them, ennobled them. This being born of God is the communication to the soul of the very life of Christ which is at once human and divine. The new-born soul is one who has received into his humanity the humanity of Christ in its perfection and the Deity of Christ in its fellowship, and so that soul has become, to use Peter's illuminative word, a partaker of the Divine nature. That new life never comes of bloods, or of effort of the flesh, or of rational, intellectual struggle. It comes directly from God.

This new life means renewal of the dead. Here is its supreme wonder. The Christ-life, given to the individual, shared by the Church aggressive in the world, is always life bestowed on those who were dead. This Christ-life God bestows not on sinless beings but on sinners, so that the great and marvelous fact is that the new birth, the new creation, is life out of death.

The new creation is after the pattern of the story we find in the book of Genesis. In the first verse I read, "In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth." That is a complete story in itself, there is nothing else to be said. Then what? "And the earth was waste and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep." That is not how God made it. Isaiah declares, "He made it not waste and void." Between verses one and two in Genesis, something happened, some cataclysm, some catastrophe, some upheaval. God has not revealed to us what happened. It may be that this very earth of ours was the place which angels first inhabited, where their probation was spent. I do not know. Between the original creation of God and the picture of the second verse it is certain that there was a cataclysm. Perhaps some day, in the fuller light, we shall discover that back there is the solution of the problem of evil and the genesis of it. What next? "The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And said, Let there be light: and there was light." In all that remains of that chapter we find, not creation, but restoration; a new creation out of a dead creation, the bringing forth of cosmos out of chaos. Things did not begin with chaos. God is not the God of confusion. Chaos never originates with God. It is held in His grasp and never allowed to escape that grasp; but the first thing is cosmos, order, beauty. Then, somehow, chaos; and then what? A new creation, restoration; the brooding Spirit of God, the uttered word of God and the first fiat, "Let there be light."

That is a perfect picture of the new birth of a soul. This Christ-life, with all its glories of grace and truth, its final, absolute, wondrous perfections, is not bestowed on perfect souls. God is not gathering into His heaven essentially new creations, having formed them in the likeness of Christ, without relation to past failure; He is bestowing this mystic, wondrous life on souls that may be described as waste and void, in darkness; on which souls He comes by the Holy Spirit, brooding on them, touching them with new life; communicating it to them, so that they rise to the realization of all that which in themselves was waste and void, to the fulfilment of all that which lay in chaotic disaster. The new birth is for finding and fulfilling every distinct capacity created by God in the first birth. To the individual soul born of God is communicated the very life of Christ, which, being possessed, takes hold of that life to which it comes, cleansing it, purging it, renewing it, energizing it, enabling it to rise to the fulfilment of that which lay within it, but in destruction; and, higher yet, to a range of being which is far beyond anything possible to humanity apart from sin, and apart from the redeeming work of Christ. The great possibility of that birth was that for which God became flesh and tabernacled among men. To make that birth possible He granted the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost. The first thing in the Christian fact is the new life of a soul; it is also the fundamental thing in the Christian witness in power by the Church in the world.

In the third place, and finally, let us notice the instructive context. The previous statement is linked to the text by the word "which," "which were born." Who are they that are thus born? Let us read. "He came unto His own, and they that were His own received Him not." In that declaration we have the whole account of the rejection of the Lord Jesus Christ by those who were His own, and there is a sense in which all men were His own, all races were His own. As presently all things are to be summed up in Him because all things proceed from Him, then all were His own. The verdict against Him was the verdict of humanity. It was the angry refusal of chaos to crown the King of order. It was the hot, rebellious refusal of the human soul, generically in revolt, to give Him His right of way. "But as many as received Him, to them gave He the right to become children of God." Preliminary to the birth, then, is the reception of the Christ. The people who received Him were born of God. There is a parenthetical word which interprets this: "Even to them that believe on His name." We may take for the illumination of our own souls whichever of these words does most profoundly appeal to us, for they are mutually interpretative. Believe on Him - what is that? Receive Him. Receive Him - what is that? Believe on Him. Only we must understand that belief here is not mere intellectual assent, it is reception of Him. All this is theory, not therefore untrue, but perhaps not powerfully appealing. Let us go back to the picture suggested by these words of John: "He came unto His own, and they that were His own received Him not." Of that rejection the Cross was the ultimate expression. The rulers have said: "We will not have this Man to reign over us." Will no one receive Him? Yes, there is one soul who will receive Him. A dying malefactor, nailed to the cross, in extremis, there and then came to faith, than which there is no more wonderful faith in the whole of the New Testament or the Bible itself. Illuminated in his dying, he saw the Crucified coming into a Kingdom. Can anything be more impossible than that? Can a crucified peasant ascend a throne? Can a murdered reformer ever come to the imperial purple? The only crown He wears is one of thorns, the only throne He has is a Roman gibbet, the only purple is that of His own blood as it flows from His wounds. He is the despised and rejected of men. But one soul crowned Him: "Jesus, remember me when Thou comest into Thy Kingdom." That is believing on Him; that is receiving Him. With infinite, majestic dignity, and all supreme authority, the answer came from the dying One to the man who received Him: "Today shalt thou be with Me in Paradise." He opens the Kingdom of heaven to all believers! In answer to that act of faith, by which that soul did receive this Christ, that soul received the gift of life. Presently the King was dead to all human appearance, and then in all probability they broke the legs of the malefactor that he might die swiftly; and now He was dead. So the world looks on, and goes its blind and ignorant way, measuring reality by the transient and trivial things that appear on the surface. Just out of sight the King meets the malefactor, and they are together in Paradise. And not to that dying malefactor only, but to others, and yet others; and on down through the ages the mystic wonder runs, and the sacramental host of God has been multiplied:

Part of His host hath crossed the flood,

And part is crossing now;

and the great, holy Catholic Church of the first-born grows into the holy temple of the Lord, always by the gift of life to individual souls who were dead, and always by the communication of the dynamic of infinite order and beauty to souls that were ruined and in chaos. It seems to me that heaven must be silent with wonder, and the angels forget to sing in silent adoration, as they watch the wonder of the process by which the Church grows to its finality, as individual souls are born again.

All this is worth while only when it becomes personal. If our Christianity falls short of that experience, then remember we are not Christian in the New Testament sense of the word. We may be admirers of the teaching of Jesus, we may most sincerely hold that His example was perfect, we may even be trying in our own strength to obey His teaching and imitate His example; but nothing short of new life creates the Christian soul.

To any who are asking the question sincerely, not with the flippancy born of intellectual arrogance, but with the earnestness begotten of spiritual agony, How can I be born again? my message is this: There is new life for you which God alone can bestow. That life He does bestow without favor on all souls who crown His Son Lord and Master of their lives, and trust to Him their destiny, and yield to Him their weakness, resting wholly on His merit, confiding only in His mercy, going forward alone in His might. So may it be ours, all of us, to know this life which is begotten of God.