**VOLUME 5; CHAPTER 15 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**CHURCH IDEALS: THE CHURCH INSTITUTED by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*The Church of God.*

*Acts 20:18*

IN THE COURSE OF HIS CHARGE TO THE ELDERS OF THE Ephesian Church, Paul made use of this particular phrase; and I propose to spend four Sunday mornings in considering certain matters which it suggests; speaking of the Church of God as revealed in the New Testament as to its constitution, its government, its discipline, and its work; our theme this morning being that of the first of these four considerations, the constitution of the Church.

We are arrested in the first place by the word itself, which is by no means common in earlier books of the New Testament; being found in the Gospel of Matthew only twice, in the other Gospels not at all, and for the first time in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles in its fifth chapter. (In the Authorized Version, the word is found in the second chapter, where it declares that, "The Lord added to the Church"; but the reading of the Revision is "The Lord added to them"; and as a matter of fact the actual statement is that "The Lord added"; meaning, as I believe, that these people were added, not to the Church, but to the Lord.) At this point in the twentieth chapter is the final occurrence of the word in this book.

Let me remind you that our word Church has no true connection with the word of which it is a translation, save in a secondary sense. Our word is a word full of beauty, coming to us through Old English from the Greek word which signifies the therefore, simply meaning the Lord's house. It was first used of the place where Christian people assembled for worship, and presently, came to be used in a higher spiritual sense of the people who assembled for worship in such a place.

The word in which we are now interested, the true word of the passage, the word of which Church is a translation, is a word occurring often subsequently, especially in the writings of Paul. The word "ecclesia" literally means called out, and is used of some company of people separated from others. In this Book of the Acts, it is used once of the congregation of the Hebrew people in the wilderness; and once it is used, though not there translated church, in the sense in which the men who first heard it would be most likely to understand it, of the governing body in one of the Greek cities. On the occasion of the uproar at Ephesus there was called together the Church at Ephesus, not the Christian Church, but the Church of Ephesus, that is, the assembly, the governing body, in which no slave could possibly hold office.

Such is the word itself. Suffice it to say it is one of those words which Christianity apprehended, and transfiguring, consecrated to its own purpose. As to its essential meaning, it signifies a people called out into separation; and as to its uses, it suggested to the men who first head it, two ideas; the Hebrew idea of the congregation, the nation itself, the Theocracy, the people God-governed; and the Greek idea of a company of free men, elected to the business of civic government. The two ideas, therefore, most probably suggested by the word to the men who first heard it from the lips of our Lord, were those of a people under the direct government of God, and a people exercising in the world an authority derived from their submission to the throne of God.

Now this word is used in our New Testament about thirteen times in its catholic sense, having reference to the whole Church of God; and about nine times in reference to the local assemblies of the people of God; the church in Thessalonica, the church in Corinth, the church in Ephesus, the church at Smyrna, and so on. Yet the words are used so interchangeably that it becomes evident that the New Testament writers always looked upon the local assembly as a microcosm of the catholic Church; and all the things declared concerning the catholic Church are true concerning the local assembly.

In approaching our study of the New Testament conception of the Church, we are compelled to take time with what is perhaps a somewhat old and often debated matter, that, namely, of the distinction that it is quite necessary to draw between the Kingdom of God and the Church of God.

There is a distinction, and before we can understand the nature or the function of the Church, it is necessary that we recognize that distinction quite clearly.

Let me begin with that very constantly recurring phrase of our Bibles, and that constantly recurring phrase of the present day, "the Kingdom of God," and inquire as to what it really means. I personally am always a little afraid lest we read into it an altogether too narrow meaning. Consequently, let us first attempt to grasp something of the breadth and spaciousness of the suggestion of the phrase itself. So far as is possible, let us free our minds from all ordinary interpretation of the meaning of the phrase, from all application of the value of the phrase; and consider the phrase itself, in order that we may understand that to which it refers.

The Kingdom of God suggests first the actual rule and reign of God; secondly, the realm over which God rules and reigns; and finally - and it is within this final thought that we generally confine our thinking - the realization of this Kingdom in the history of men, and in this world in which we live. We pray "Thy Kingdom come," and our Master taught us so to pray; and when we pray, we are thinking of an actual and experimental and conscious establishment of His Kingdom in the world. It is right that we should so pray, we must continue so to pray, and we must work as we pray toward the establishment of the Kingdom. But there is a sense in which that Kingdom has already come, in which that Kingdom is already established. We come into the most true understanding of the teaching of our Bible when we remember that the phrase itself means the rule and reign of God. Included within the phrase is a theology, a science of God, a doctrine of God. It assumes the Divine transcendence, the fact that God is seated high above all the affairs of the universe. Included in it also is the fact of the Divine immanence, His nearness to and perpetual sustenance of every atom of the universe over which He sits enthroned.

It involves also the doctrine of a personal God. I know the difficulty of using the word personal in this relationship; a difficulty born of the fact that we are constantly postulating the Divine Personality upon the basis of our own personality, which I submit is a wrong process of reasoning. Personality is only perfect in God. It is never perfect in man. Man is but a shadow of the Divine, a likeness, an image, a representation; and so in the matter of personality there is imperfection in man, while there is perfection in God.

This phrase of the Kingdom of God involves the doctrine of the personality of God; intelligence, emotion, volition; all the essential things of our own personality, but in absolute and infinite perfection.

The phrase reminds us that of this universe, of which we know so little and can know so little, God is the Creator, the Sustainer; arranging beforehand, as Paul said in Athens, the bounds of human habitation; fashioning, as the writer of the letter to the Hebrews declared, all the ages as they come, giving them all their tones and qualities and quantities. The whole universe is the realm over which God reigns. The Kingdom of God is a fact established from which there can be no escape on the part of angels or men or demons. All are within the grasp of His government, all are compelled to yield themselves, whether willingly or unwillingly, to the sway of His power, and to the ultimate purposes of His wisdom.

These are the profoundest things, the most spacious things, suggested by a phrase which we too often use as though it only had reference to things of this earth.

And at last, the phrase does stand for the establishment in this world of the Kingdom, where today we are supremely impressed by sin, and sorrow, and sighing; there will be established the Kingdom of our God, a Kingdom of love and joy and peace, of perfect human well-being in individual and social, national and international relationships. The establishment of the Kingdom, or Kingship of God in the world, is the last idea suggested by the phrase itself.

Now this great thought is the fundamental truth of Biblical revelation. The first chapters of the first book in the Bible suggest these things pre-eminently. Whatever difficulties we may have concerning what we are pleased to speak of as the authenticity or the historicity of these chapters, at least we must be perfectly agreed that they teach that all things have had their origin in the will and by the power of this one God. That as I understand it, is the fundamental teaching of the earliest chapters of the Book of Genesis. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." And in all that remains of the Old Testament, that is the perpetual chord of the dominant strain; and all the music, sometimes in major and sometimes in minor cadences, is true to that underlying chord; proclaiming the throne of God, and the government of God. The whole history of the Hebrew people is the history of the creation of a people recognizing that fact; and by obedience to it come to power and influence in the world; or by forgetting it, becoming a people scattered and peeled over the face of the whole earth. This throne and government of God, this sovereignty of God, is the great truth that runs through all the Old Testament.

When I turn to the New Testament, I find that this is still the theme. The first word falling from the lips of the forerunner of the Christ is, "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." The first words falling from the lips of the Christ Himself as He commenced His ministry of preaching is, "Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is at hand." The whole of His administration - judged by His ethical standards, and His spiritual interpretations, by His works as well as His words - circles around this one word, "Seek ye first His Kingdom, do His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you." The supreme passion of His heart, as crystallized in the prayer which He taught His disciples, and which we constantly repeat, is the same. He did not teach us to pray first for the things we need individually, but for the coming of God's Kingdom in this world, and its establishment here.

If we watch the ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ, and observe His dealing with His own nation after the flesh, we find that there came a solemn and awful moment, when with quiet dignity, in the metropolis of the nation, and in the Temple, the center of the metropolitan life, He said this most significant thing to the rulers of the people, "The Kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof."

Or, if we remind ourselves of the first occasion upon which He used the word "Church," let us note very carefully, not all the values of His announcement, but one particular emphasis thereof. To the confessor Peter, He said, "I also say unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My Church; and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. I. will give unto thee the keys of the Kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." In other words, I will make My Church the standard of moral interpretation, binding or loosing the standards of conduct among the affairs of men; the keys of the Kingdom were thus committed to the men who for the moment stood as the sole representation of that Church which He was about to build.

Or, if we turn to those pages in the New Testament which deal with the sacred ministry of the Spirit, the fundamental fact is still that of the Kingdom of God; interpreted through the Christ as the Spirit unveils the Christ; realized within the Church as the Spirit creates a race of men who will say, in answer to all opposition and all persecution and all criticism, "We must obey God rather than men." That was Peter's answer on behalf of the apostles and the whole Christian community to the criticism and opposition and persecution of the Sadducean high priest and governing board, "How dare you," said the priest, "preach in the name of Jesus when we straightly charged you not to do so?" And the answer was, "We must obey God rather than men"; or, in other words, we are in the Kingdom of God, submissive to His throne, recognizing no other authority that we can allow to interfere as between us and Himself. We must obey God.

As we glance on at what the New Testament says concerning the future, we find that it declares that this Kingdom is to be preached and realized beyond the age of the Church; and eventually in one mystic passage the apostle declares that when He, the Lord Christ, has subdued all rule and authority and power to His own sway, having reigned until even death is put beneath His feet: then He shall deliver up the Kingdom to the Father, that God may be all and in all.

Now we come to the phrase, "The Church of God," which is not of the Old Testament, which no prophet ever understood; and to the fact, to which no prophecy of the Old Testament has any reference whatever; a fact hidden in the past, revealed in these times, the fact of the Church. The Church according to this New Testament teaching is an elect race, a company of people called out, and unified by a common life; to create which, Christ came, and the Spirit came to abide; an entity, which ultimately is to be complete within itself; an entity, the full and glorious vocation of which does not begin in this age, but in the ages to come; an entity, nevertheless, which has most intimate relationship with that Master principle of the Kingdom, to which we have been giving our thought; a company of those in the world today in whom that Kingdom principle is realized, through whom that Kingdom principle is manifested, through whom that Kingdom fact is to be propagated amongst men.

Let me again refer to words of our Lord already quoted: He said to the Hebrew people, "The Kingdom of God shall be taken away from you and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof"; and when Peter wrote his letter, he described the Church among other phrases, by this suggestive one, "a holy nation." The Church of God then is that holy nation in the history of the world; realizing the Kingdom principle; manifesting the Kingdom value; proclaiming the Kingdom fact; propagating the Kingdom forces.

Then if that be so, let us now ask, What is the constitution of this Church?

The two references made to it by our Lord I have already referred to, and do not propose to deal with at any length, but I am compelled to commence with them, because in them I find in germ, all truth concerning this elect company, the Church. He said, "Thou art Peter" - and I should much prefer to render with absolute literalness of translation, "Thou art rock, and upon this rock I will build My Church." Do not forget to link that word of Jesus at Caesarea Philippi with the first thing He ever said to this man. When He first met him, He said, "Thou art Simon the son of John: thou shalt be called rock." At Caesarea Philippi He said, "Thou art rock, and upon this rock I will build My Church." What rock? That master principle which, obtaining in the life of this man, had changed him from weakness to massive and perpetual strength. Not the man, not the man's humanity, not the apostle, blundering and failing; but that principle which had made him rock. And what was the principle that had made him rock? His discovery of God in Christ, and of the administration of the Kingship of God in Christ; Thou art the Christ, that is, the Messiah; the Son, that is, One showing the essential being of the living God. So that the ultimate word in the confession of Peter was the living God; and he recognized in Jesus the revelation of the living God; the Son; and he recognized in Him, the administration of the will of the living God, the Messiah. Upon that rock, that essential rock of Deity, of Deity revealed, of Deity administered, so as to change Simon from the weak changing man that he was into the man of rock, "upon that rock I will build My Church."

Or more briefly, to take the second reference to the Church on the part of our Lord, when speaking of the Church's discipline and power in prayer, He declared, "Where two or three are gathered together in My name, there am I in the midst." That reveals the fact that the Church consists of all those who are gathered about the living Lord, and who by the administration of His Holy Spirit share His very life and nature, and are the instruments of His discipline, as He is the medium of their prevailing prayer.

The next historic reference to the Church is found in the fifth chapter of the Acts. What has happened? Our Lord foretold the Church, and now I find the Church referred to as an existing entity; great fear came upon the whole Church when the fiery discipline that purged the fellowship of the presence of Ananias and Sapphira was manifested. Then suddenly, without introduction, the Church is referred to as existing. Whence came it? The answer is to be found in the second chapter of the book. By the coming of the Spirit upon a company of waiting disciples, that company was baptized into a living unity. They became one; they were joined to the Lord; and became one Spirit with the Lord; and being one Spirit with the Lord, they were also so with one another. It was a baptism into life, the dawn of a new light, the power of a new love taking possession of them; and the life was the life of the Christ; and the light was the light of the Christ; and the love was the love of the Christ. Not that they loved Him, but that He loved them, and that love took possession of them, and became the impulse of all their doing and serving and suffering. Behold in the upper room on the day of Pentecost, after the coming of the Spirit, a company of men and women, no longer geographically near to the Lord, for He was absent as to all human appearance and presence; no longer one sentimentally with the Lord; but one with Him by the mystic tie of spiritual life. His life and their life made one by the baptism of the Spirit. So the Church came to be.

In view of that, the apostle wrote that which we read as lesson in the Corinthian letter, "In one Spirit were we all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether bond or free; and were all made to drink of one Spirit. For the body is not one member, but many." That is the Church; the Christ Himself the Head; and all individual believing men and women, baptized by the Spirit into relationship with Him, the members; quite independent of nationality, Jews or Greeks; quite independent of social position, bond-slaves or free men. The great baptism of the Spirit destroys the differences, and creates the unity; the great baptism of the Spirit whelms human life, and brings it to the realization of its own powers, by linking it to the Master life, the life of the Lord and Master Himself. So was the Church originally constituted. And so the Church has grown through all the ages.

Paul, when in the Ephesian letter, dealing with the great theme of unity, which is the theme of our morning meditation, said, "Giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit," and the great vision of the catholic Church filled his mind as he wrote that. Then he suddenly breaks it up, that we may see and understand it, showing us the way of entrance into this new and holy relationship; "one Lord," that is the Lord Jesus Christ presented to the vision of the individual man; "one faith," that is the faith of the man who sees the Lord, ventures everything upon Him, trusts in Him; "one baptism," that is the baptism of the Holy Spirit whereby that believing soul is made a member of that one Lord. So the Church has grown through all the ages. No man has ever been made a member of the Church by the vote of a Church meeting, or having his name written upon a Society Class book. All these things may be valuable in their place; but they are external and accidental. Men become members of this great Church of God when the Lord is presented, and they call Him Lord by Faith, and as a result of the Spirit's interpretation; and then by the Spirit's baptism are made sharers of His very life, sharers of His very nature.

And what is the purpose of this Church? Let Paul finish that which I have partially quoted in the Ephesian paragraph, and we shall know. "One God and Father of all, Who is over all, and through all, and in all," The Church is the one Body, the members and the Christ; the way into the Church, one Lord presented, one faith exercised, one baptism received; the issue of the Church, the Kingdom of God, "one God and Father, over all and through all and in all." The Kingdom of God realized, manifested, proclaimed.

Therefore, I am a member of this catholic Church, if I have believed on this one Lord, and have received the baptism of the Spirit whereby I am made a member of this Lord. The baptism of the Spirit is not a second blessing; the filling may be; the enduement for power certainly is; but we cannot interpret our doctrine of the Spirit, in the light of the New Testament, without recognizing that the baptism, the whelming into life, is in answer to that faith, whereby a man becomes a member of the Lord.

The first practical value of this teaching is that of a recognition on our part of the unity of the Church. Brethren, are we praying as we ought, for that recognition? Are we living as we ought in order to the realization of it? To the passage already twice quoted, let me refer again, "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beseech you to walk worthily of the calling wherewith ye were called." And how shall we do it? First "giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"; and I always feel that I want to change that translation a little. Not that it is inaccurate, but that we have such strange ideas of what keeping may mean. "Giving diligence to keep" does not mean to guard as with a garrison. That is the thought when Paul says, "I know Him Whom I have believed, and I am persuaded that He is able to keep," the word there means to guard as with a garrison. But that is not the word here; and I do no violence, nay, I illuminate the passage by translating thus, "Giving diligence to keep in view the unity of the Spirit," not to create it. We cannot create unity; we can keep it in view, never forget it, and live in the power of the fact of it. Then remember, it is the unity of the Spirit, not the unanimity of the mind. There may be many mental moods and methods of approach to the great fact of the Lord Himself and His Church. Not the uniformity of the body. I care very little, less and less for that; but the unity, the oneness of the Spirit. In proportion as the Church of God comes to that recognition, that keeping in view, with the corresponding answer of life to the fact of the unity of the Spirit, in that proportion we shall be content to sympathize with the differing mental convictions and bodily manifestations that the Church may take. These are the great lessons of study; the unity of the Church, and the continuity of the Church, and the certainty that the Church will at last be completed, and be presented to the Father for all that high and awe-inspiring vocation that lies beyond the present age.

Another practical lesson that we need to remember is that membership of the Church consists in fellowship with the life of the Lord of the Church. That life is light, and all the outlook is changed wherever it comes. That life is love, and the central passion and impulse of life is changed wherever it comes.

We have no right to hold any lower conception of the Church than this; and no lower conception of the nature of Church membership than this; and if that with which I commenced be true, that the local church is, or ever should be a microcosm of the Church catholic, the realization within a limited area of all the great truth which applies to the whole fellowship; then the local church should be one consisting of all those who have seen this Lord, and yielded to Him; and who have received by the Spirit's baptism the gift of His life; and whose central, burning, consuming passion therefore is the Kingdom of God established in the individual life, revealed to the world, proclaimed to men; and toward the ultimate victory of which all endeavor is consecrated.

May we be, so much as is possible to us, such a church; and to this end, may we who form the fellowship, be such men and women as sharing His life, yield to it, for the glory of His name. Amen.