**VOLUME 5; CHAPTER 16 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

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

*He is the Head of the Body, the Church: Who is the beginning, the Firstborn from the dead; that in all things He might have the pre-eminence.*

*Colossians 1:18*

IT WILL AT ONCE BE CONCEDED THAT THERE ARE VERY many matters full of interest and full of value suggested within the compass of this sublime declaration of the apostle. Let me say at once that I am now proposing to deal only with one aspect of the truth included in this statement, that, namely, of the Headship of the Lord in the Church.

Having considered the subject of the constitution of the Church, we have now to deal with the Church as a separate entity, unified by a common life, while yet made up of distinct individualities. Our present theme is that of authority within the Church, the nature of the government of the Church of God which has thus been constituted, and which is thus growing into a holy temple in the Lord.

The question of government is one of difficulty, because of the fact already referred to, that the Church is made up of separate individualities; that men and women, believing in the Lord Christ, and being by the Holy Spirit baptized into living union with Him, do not in the hour of that baptism and reception lose their personality, their individuality, their separateness, in some sense of the words. There would be no difficulty in this matter of government apart from this fact.

If the figure of the apostle incidentally referred to in our text, and wrought out into fuller detail in his Corinthian letter, the figure of the Church as the Body of Christ be borne in mind, then at once the whole question of authority within the Church, of the government of the Church, is revealed so patently that there can be no misunderstanding of the ideal. As is the head to all the members of the body, so is the Christ to the whole of His Church.

But the difficulty referred to remains, and experience shows it to be a very serious difficulty; and therefore, we need carefully to consider what the New Testament teaches on this matter. And let me again say, as I said in connection with our previous study, not merely that we may know, but that by the grace of God we may be conformed to His Will in this matter as members of His Church, and so fulfil His purpose according to the measure possible to us.

The first affirmation of the New Testament to which I would draw your attention is that contained within this text. It is the declaration of the absolute Headship of Christ, that He is Himself, in some special and wonderful way, the Head of the Church - special, that is - in distinction from the fact of His Headship over the whole creation. And yet, the fact of that Headship over creation must be borne in mind in this connection, for to take this particular verse from its context will be to rob it of much of its virtue and many of its values.

Let us take time to remind ourselves that this declaration occurs in the passage which we read as our lesson, a passage in which we have perhaps the most full and wonderful statement in the whole system of Paul's doctrine of the Person of Christ. It is indeed a great passage, and it was written in order to set forth clearly - as clearly as such infinite mysteries may ever be set forth - the truth concerning the personality of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The apostle first shows the relation of Christ to God in one sublime and swiftly ending sentence, "Who is the Image of the invisible God?" In greater detail he then sets forth the relation of Christ to the whole creation; and that relation may be summarized in this brief word taken from the fuller description, He is "the first-born of all creation, and He is before all things, and in Him ill things consist" - that is, hold together. Thus the apostle affirms the pre-existence of this mystic Person, and His activity in that glorious hour when the sons of God sang together in the presence of the dawning wonders of a new creation, declaring that He was Himself the Creator. The apostle speaks of Him further as Sustainer of the Creation, as he describes Him as holding all these together by His own power, so that in Him they consist.

He then passes to the subject of the relation between Christ and His Church, declaring that He is Head over all things to the Church; and here again he uses the phrase already employed in connection with creation, but with a modification that demands our attention, "The Firstborn from the dead."

Let us now pause to make the distinction to which we have already drawn attention incidentally. This Person is described as "Firstborn of creation," and it is at once recognized that the word is figurative, and suggestive of abounding life, and used in reference to that primal origin, the mystery of which is always beyond us, but the solution of which is always ready to our hands when we open our Bible and read, "In the beginning God created."

But in the midst of this creation is the fact of death, and we are everywhere conscious of the dark pall of it, the tremendous mystery of it, the alarming pain of it! Then the apostle draws attention to One emerging from it, Who is the selfsame Christ, Firstborn from the dead! By virtue of all that strange and mystic phrase connotes, He is Head of His Church, Head of that gathered-out company of men and women, who, having had a vision of the one Lord, have exercised in Him the one faith, and have received the one baptism of the Spirit, and thus have been created His ecclesia, His called-out people, under His authority, exercising His authority in the world.

Now from these spacious outlooks and these magnificent heights of the apostolic vision and teaching, we may safely and reverently turn, in order to declare that the one only and absolute authority within the Christian Church is that of the Lord Himself. He is the Founder and Builder of His Church. His work made it possible for the Spirit of God to come in that new method discovered to us in the story of Pentecost. Belief in Him precedes that baptism of the Spirit whereby we are quickened into a new life of fellowship with God. He abides forevermore, the sole Possessor of His people, and His will must be the final authority within His Church concerning every individual member, and concerning every detail of the manifold and complex life of every individual member, and consequently, concerning the whole Church, as to the methods of its service, as to the meaning of its service, and as to the processes by which it fulfils that service. We inquire, then, what is the government of the Church? To that inquiry we reply inclusively and exhaustively when we say, "He is the Head over all things to the Church."

So far all Christians are in perfect agreement. Our disagreement or our difference - or shall I rather say our difficulty? - begins when we inquire how the will of that one Lord and Master is to be made known to His Church.

Let us for a few moments turn from the fundamental consideration in order that we may inquire whether, in the days of His flesh, He said anything that will help us. And immediately our thoughts revert to His Paschal discourses, to those final words spoken, not to the promiscuous multitude, but to the inner circle of disciples in the upper room, to those wonderful words recorded only by John. To those words, therefore, let me take you back for brief quotations only.

In the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel I find these words: I pluck them out of the rest, I hardly like to do so, and yet, they are what we specially need for our present consideration - "l will inquire of the Father" - and that is not satisfactory, but a little more so than "I will pray the Father," for when we read "pray," we think of asking, as we present a petition; and Christ never so prayed. His word for His own prayer is always different from that used to describe our praying; He asked upon the level of perfect equality and fellowship: "I will inquire of the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that He may be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, Whom the world cannot receive." Or, turning to a declaration a little later in the sixteenth chapter of John, I find these words: "When He, the Spirit of truth, is come, He shall guide you into all the truth: for He shall not speak from Himself: but what things soever He shall hear, these shall He speak; and He shall declare unto you the things that are to come: He shall glorify Me: for He shall take of Mine, and shall declare it unto you. All things whatsoever the Father hath are Mine: therefore, said I, that He taketh of Mine, and shall declare it unto you. A little while, and ye behold Me no more; and again a little while, and ye shall see Me."

Now in the last declaration of that passage there is no reference to a second advent, its reference being rather to the new and spiritual vision that should be granted to these men by the coming of the Spirit; to that fact to which Paul referred when he said, "We henceforth know no man after the flesh, even though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now we know Him so no more."

Christ said to that little band of His own disciples, whose hearts were breaking because He was going away, and who were strangely perplexed as to the mystery of the things He was saying to them, who did not, even after He had finished His speech, understand Him, but were compelled to wait for this selfsame enlightenment of the Spirit: "A little while, and ye behold Me no more." John will no longer be able to lay his hand on Mine as we sit at the board, or lean his head upon My bosom as I tell him secrets of love. "And again a little while, and ye shall see Me." You will see Me as you have never seen Me before, and John will be able to write: "That which was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we beheld, and our hands handled, concerning the Word of life." And this change would all be wrought, he declared, by the coming of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit came, in the first place, to reveal to the inner circle of His own disciples the Person of the Lord perpetually, persistently, perfectly. The Spirit came to reveal to them the meaning of things which Jesus had said, and which they did not yet understand. The Spirit came to abide with loyal men and women and children, and to reveal to them the will of the Lord about all the details of their lives.

And consider, brethren - thinking only for the moment individually, for presently, the corporate question will become more difficult, thinking only individually - how wondrously the living authority of the Lord has been established in the lives of men by the Holy Spirit. He came to reveal the Person of Christ, One of the central and perpetual wonders of Christian experience is that of the individual acquaintance of individual men and women with the Lord Christ, an individual acquaintance of individual men and women with a Person Who is to them in their thinking as human and as real as the Man of Nazareth was to Peter, James and John. I feel the difficulty of the thing I am trying to say. I know this Christ - suffer the word of experience - I know what it is to live with Him, and walk with Him, and talk with Him, and travel with Him, and have Him rebuke me; ah, and have Him whisper to me, "Well done!" And I have in my heart the picture of Him. He is as real to me, more real than any other earthly friend, and that, too, in human seeming and semblance; and that is why I very much dislike pictures of Him. Oh, there are a few I tolerate, and yet I seldom look at them without becoming critical, and without having to say, "No, that is not the picture of my Lord." It was a portrait of Him, the Lord, to the man who painted it! If by some sacred magic at this moment this whole audience could become artists, and each person could rapidly sketch the portrait of the Lord as he or she knows Him, what infinite variety, and yet what underlying unity, we should have. If we could merge the myriad photographs of Him into one picture, what glory, what beauty! Four men did that long ago, Matthew said, "This is how I saw Him"; and Luke said, "Theophilus, I want to draw Him for you as I have found him"; and Mark said, "This is how Peter saw Him, and how I saw Him"; and John said, "Wait, just a few touches more, there are many things not yet described!" And they are all different; but we bring them together and merge them, and, lo, this is He! How did Matthew write his gospel? On the human standpoint he wrote it with perfect naturalness, and with no conception that he was inspired; but the Spirit had come, and He was revealing his Master to him, calling back to his memory things he saw Him do, and heard Him say; and so he wrote. And that inspiration did not cease when the gospel stories were written. It lives until this moment. I ventured a moment ago to say experimentally to you, I know this Christ, and, as I said so, I saw a light on many faces which meant, We also know Him, we walk with Him and talk with Him; He is as real to us, more real than any other earthly friend.

The Master said, "Yet a little while I am with you, and yet a little while and I will come again"; and He came, and He has since been the perpetual presence. I know Him personally, individually, and that by the ministry of the Spirit of God, taking hold of what I am in myself, finding the recesses of my need, and filling them with the revelation of my Lord's sufficiency, indicating to me the dynamic force of His energy for the overcoming of the weakness of my frailty; and not of me only, who am less than the least of all the saints is this true; it is equally true of the whole company of the saints for nineteen centuries. And when at last we reach His heaven, the picture we have seen of Christ will have become our own portrait, for we shall be like Him. Then, when God has gathered the varied and matchless splendors of the whole host of the ransomed into one effulgent glory, behold the Firstborn from the dead! Thus He is making known to us His authoritative will by individual interpretation.

Brethren, the Church of God is not a company of people gathered around the memory of a dead and lost leader; it is constituted, not by the acceptance of a final ethic uttered nineteen centuries ago, not by the adoration of a great ideal that passed across the vision of humanity in Judaea long ago, but by the Abiding presence - where two or three are gathered in His name - of the Lord Himself. By the living presence of that living Lord, and by the interpretation of the abiding Spirit, we know Him; and His will is made known to His own who desire to know it, amid the hurry and the hub-bub of London; in the Houses of Parliament; as that Christian man sweeps the streets; upon the professional round; in the midst of a thousand and one domestic duties. He is with us by the Spirit, to say what is now to be done, to all such as are yielded to Him, and desire to know.

What, then, should be the Church's attitude toward these facts? The acknowledgment of His Headship; submission to the indwelling Spirit Whose office it is to interpret His will to all His people, and therefore initially - cessation from self, consenting to that separating redemption that brings us away from the world, abandonment to those cleansing fires that purify us from iniquity, a yielding of ourselves to that impulsing love, that makes us forevermore a people zealous of good works.

Now to turn from these things which are the true things and the deep things, and yet which are in a measure mystic. We inquire, how is this authority of our Lord to be applied in the actual corporate life of the Christian Church? I would remind you of what we considered in our previous meditation, that this word "Church" occurs about thirteen times in our New Testament in reference to the whole catholic Church of God; that it occurs over ninety times in reference to local assemblies, such as the church at Thessalonica, the church at Corinth, the church at Colosse; and that as we watch these occasions, and observe what doctrines gather about them, we discover that most evidently in the mind of these new Testament writers the local church is a microcosm of the catholic Church.

What, then, we ask, are we to learn from a study of these Scriptures concerning the authority of Christ, and its application as within the Church of God? First of all, I think they teach us that the authority of Christ by the Spirit in the Church is apostolic in principle, but not in detail. Apostolic in principle, that is as to these very things which we have been considering; the apostolic teaching concerning the Headship of Christ Himself; the apostolic teaching concerning the priesthood of all believers, and their right of access within the Holy of all for thanksgiving, as the eucharistic priesthood; and for intercession, the priesthood of prayer; the apostolic teaching concerning the guidance of the Spirit and the laws of spiritual life; and I venture to add personally, of conviction, the apostolic teaching concerning the ordinances of our Christian faith, the ordinance of baptism, and the ordinance of the observance of the Lord's Supper. These are great principles laid down by the holy apostles for our perpetual instruction, and to all these we are to be in obedience, and know that as we are living in obedience to them we are acting according to the will of the indwelling Christ, Who is our Lord and Master.

But we are not to be obedient to apostolic example in detail. I do not want to stay with this subject very long, but must touch upon it. The questions of music and of buildings, of times and seasons, of feasts and fasts, as we may find them in the New Testament, are questions of detail rather than of principle. We are not to be bound by the details of apostolic habit, but we are to be governed by the principles of apostolic teaching.

The reason for this is that this ministry of the Spirit for the interpretation of the will of our Lord is immediate and direct. The Spirit will, within the assembly of His people today, indicate His will if His people are waiting to know that will; and the Spirit will perfectly equip His people for the doing of His work in the world by the bestowment of gifts necessary for that work. Let us ponder these simple things carefully; first, that we cannot find a complete list in the New Testament of the gifts of the Spirit; that this great apostle of the Church, Paul, gave one list when he wrote to the Corinthians, and another when he wrote to the Ephesians. Some included in the first list are found also in the second; some are omitted; but in the second there will be those not in the first. We cannot find at any one place a list of the gifts of the Spirit, and therefore, let us never make the mistake of gathering out from all the different passages the gifts, and writing them in order, and saying, "These are the gifts of the Spirit." No, the Spirit giveth to everyone severally as He will, which means that, according to the necessity, so is the gift bestowed. There were gifts named by the apostle in the early Church that we cannot find in the Church today. If you tell me that that is a sign that the Church is degenerate, I answer, by no means, for there are gifts in the Church today not found in the Church in apostolic times; and that is not a proof that the Church in apostolic times was degenerate. The Holy Spirit is always changing the gifts according to the changing needs of changing times, and one of the gravest perils threatening the Church is that it does not discover the gift when bestowed, and make way for its use. "He gave some apostles, and some prophets, and some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers," abiding gifts for the ministry of the Word; but many others, helps, governments, healings in the past, and in the present new gifts bestowed constantly; so that if there be a piece of work to be done peculiar to London, the Spirit of God will give a man the gift he needs, which would be of no use in New York; so that if there is to be a peculiar work done in New York, the Spirit will bestow the gift upon some man for that work. The trouble is we send men out to India that God wants for London, and keep men in London that God wants for India.

Wherein, then, lies the failure in the Church in the matter of government? We have been trying to govern the Church otherwise, and by our own wit and our own wisdom to find out the way to do God's work, instead of remembering that the living Lord, and not a dead Leader is at the center of the Christian Church, and that the living Spirit, and not past interpretations, constitutes the method of guidance and direction in all our work. The Spirit calls whomsoever He will. He qualifies whomsoever He calls. He sends whosoever He qualifies. The trouble is that the Church of God so often is not prepared to do what the church at Antioch did, and to say, "It seems good to the Holy Ghost and to us to send forth Saul and Barnabas."

The Church should be in direct contact with this supreme Will, apostolic in her attitude, but direct in her obedience. Our Lord is not divided from us by the distance even of the holy apostles. They did their work; they formulated the doctrines; they pioneered the way along which others have followed in the proclamation of the evangel; and, so far as their writings have been preserved for us, they become the basis of authority; but so far as their own example was concerned, it is not binding upon us. I do not ask what the Church in Jerusalem did in the matter of its worship, or in the matter of its work. I ask what will the living Lord have us to do in London? Let Him tell us by His Holy Spirit Who is with us now.

All attempts, beloved, to substitute an authority within the Church for that of the living Christ are wrong. Nay, I will go further. All attempts to create mediation between the authority of Christ and His Church, save the mediation of the Spirit, are wrong; and whether it be the substitution of an authority, or whether it be the attempt to discover His authority through other mediation than that of the Spirit, these are the lines, following which we wander from the way of His will, and make ourselves weak in our testimony to the world.

We require no pope who is God's vicar, because the Lord is not absent. We require no king to ratify our appointments, because the King Himself appoints and ratifies. We require no bishops to prescribe for us the order of our service, for the Lord Himself will arrange. We decline to allow any Conference, or Union, or Synod to interfere with the freedom of our work, for we are in glad bondage to the Living Lord. We deny that the Church meeting is authoritative by reason of the fact that a majority is in favor of this or of that. That is not Church authority; and where the Church - if my brethren of other ecclesiastical convictions will be patient with me for a moment - where the Church is Congregational, and gathers together in its Church meeting, and proceeds always upon the basis of the vote of a majority, it is surely going astray. In the life of the spiritual church there will come mystic hours in which a majority will say, "This is our thought and will, but we will not do it. We will wait and consult and pray with the minority, and wait upon the Lord, until the unanimity of the Spirit possesses us all." It is the authority of the present, living, reigning Lord in the assembly of His people, which is the true Church authority. The Lord has never delegated His authority. We believe in the real presence of the living Lord, and the result of that is unity, not uniformity, the unity of His Kingly Headship, differing in detail at different times and under differing circumstances, caring little and less for ritual, for uniformity of dress, or even of creed. Not mental unanimity, not bodily uniformity, but spiritual unity, is the great result of the recognition of the presence and Headship of the Lord, and the submission of His people to His rule.

But the final and the personal word under such consideration is that this government of the Lord Christ within His own Church is principally interfered with when we are not in right relationship with the Paraclete, the Advocate, the Comforter, the Spirit Himself.

Let me but recall to your memory three little words of the New Testament which seem to me to exhaust the perils confronting us concerning the Spirit: "Resist not the Spirit," "Quench not the Spirit," "Cause not sorrow to the Spirit." To resist Him in the working of His mighty energy for the accomplishment of Divine purpose, to quench Him in the bestowment of His fire-gifts whereby we co-operate with God; to cause sorrow to Him by our disobedience and our disloyalty; these are the ways in which we prevent His fulfilling His ministry within us, and among us, and through us; these are the ways in which we lose the vision of our Lord and our sense of His nearness, and wander away from the pathway of His will, and fail in our attempts to realize His purposes.

May these be granted to us, first of all a new and abounding consciousness of the supremacy of Christ, and then a new and more complete yielding of ourselves to the Spirit of interpretation; that so there may come to us a larger, fuller, richer sense of the unity of the Church; that so, finally, God through us may be able to move forward toward the goal of the establishment of His Kingdom, through Christ our Lord.