**VOLUME 7; CHAPTER 11 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**TONGUES LIKE AS OF FIRE by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*And there appeared unto them tongues parting asunder, like as of fire; and it sat upon each one of them.*

*Acts 2:3*

THE DAY OF PENTECOST HAD COME. THE WEEK OF WEEKS had run its course. Nine and forty days had passed since Passover. Devout men from every nation under heaven were at Jerusalem for this Feast of Weeks, and in an upper room a few men, insignificant, and yet chosen in the economy of God as witnesses for the initiation of a new world movement, took part in the fulfilment of that of which Pentecost, the Hebrew Feast, had been but a shadow. The Teacher and Master of these men had been crucified at Passover, and by His crucifixion all their hopes had been destroyed, all their aspirations disappointed, their very faith in His ability to do what they had hoped He would do shaken to the foundation, indeed had collapsed. Their faith in Him personally had never faltered, their love of Him had never failed; but by that Cross it had been demonstrated to them in such a way that they found no appeal from the demonstration that He could not set up His Kingdom, and so they had been scattered.

Then the supreme and arresting wonder of the Resurrection had been the means of gathering them together again. By that Resurrection their Lord and Master was declared to them to be far more than they had ever dreamed. He was the Son of God in a profounder sense even than Peter had under- stood when at Caesarea Philippi he had confessed His Messiahship. By that Resurrection they were, to use the language of Peter himself in one of his later letters, begotten again unto a living hope. Hope had failed, faith had faltered, love had lived; but now in the resurrection glory hope was renewed, faith in His ability to accomplish His purpose was renewed, and love became nobler, purer, finer.

For many days He had tarried, always near at hand, though mystically and strangely. Sometimes absent from them; and then swiftly and without notice, present anong them, right there, where they thought He was not. At other times walking with them by the way, sitting with them at the board; and then suddenly absent from them, not there, where they were quite sure He was. Such were the strange comings and goings of the forty days, appearances and disappearances, appearances in order to strengthen faith and to reassure them that He was alive, disappearance in order to train them to do without the bodily manifestation and the bodily presence.

Then He vanished out of their sight, and for ten days they had been waiting in the upper room. Jerusalem filled with the crowds, devout men from every nation gathering there: Parthians, Medes, Elamites, all with different accents, from varied localities, gathered for the Feast of Pentecost, for the Feast of Weeks. But the central fact of this particular feast was not wrought out in the temple courts, but in the upper room. It was a moment and an event of untold importance in the history of humanity. We are not gathered here simply to recall to our minds something that happened, or that men imagined happened, two millenniums ago. That which began then is going on still. New forces then began to come into action in human history which within a generation touched the whole known world; they moved the Roman world to its center, influenced the Greek world throughout all its great cities, and scattered the Hebrew world, and, spreading through all these, made revolutions everywhere.

In that hour, in the upper room in Jerusalem, the results of the life and death and resurrection of Jesus were beginning to be applied to the experience of individual souls. The light that broke upon these men in the upper room in that hour was a light in which they saw their Lord as they had never seen Him. The sound of the mighty rushing wind that filled the house where they were assembled was in some mystic sense a tone in which all the voices of the past became articulate with a new message; they heard the voices of other days merging into the ultimate harmony of the speech of the Son. In that upper room all the values, the virtues, and the victories of the life and death and resurrection of the Lord were made to them more than theories, they were rendered experiences. They were in that hour brought into new and vital relationship with Him such as they had never known in the days of His flesh, nor could have known. In that hour was fulfilled the word which Christ Himself had spoken in the upper room, and which had filled them with trouble at the time, "It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I go I will send Him unto you … When He, the Spirit of truth, is come, He shall guide you into all the truth. … He shall glorify Me; for He shall take of Mine, and shall declare it unto you." That promise was being fulfilled. The new economy of the Spirit of God in human history was beginning. The Church of God, the Christian Church of God, was born in that hour.

In this story there is no sentence or phrase which is not suggestive and worthy of the closest study. From it I select the one visible sign which was granted to these men in that hour of the new and special coming of the Holy Spirit: "Tongues parting asunder, like as of fire."

It is to be observed that the initial hours in this new economy were hours in which it was necessary that there should be certain signs drawing attention to the new facts and symbolizing those new facts. Thus there were the sound of the rushing, mighty wind, the sign of the disparting fire into the shape of tongues, and the accompaniment of the strange and wonderful gift of tongues, all which things were merely initial. All these things were sensual, that is, they appealed to the senses. They were introductory, initial, presently to be done away when the larger spiritual truth should be realized. That I think we need to remember. Just as, during the forty days prior to ascension there were signs appealing to the senses given to the disciples, the appearance and disappearances of Christ, all intended to train the disciples to do without these things; so in the first movements of the new era of the Spirit's operation there were signs granted, all intended to cease when they should no longer be needed. I believe that in the history of the Christian Church there have been eras when God has restored men by signs. He may be going to do it now, I do not know. But, remember, whenever it is so, it is in itself a sign of failure preceding it. Spiritual life on its highest level asks no sign, and needs none. Signs are only for the drawing of men spiritually dull into apprehension of spiritual things. God did, in the economy of infinite patience and unsurpassing grace, employ these signs at the beginning. From these earliest of signs, then, I take that of the visible token given to these men in the upper room.

Let us consider, first, the tongues which these men saw as being the true symbol of the Christian Church. Second, let us consider the material of the symbol, fire, in its valuable and important suggestiveness. Finally, let us consider the teaching of the fact that this is the symbol of the Church.

First, then, I ask you to observe that this was the moment when the Christian Church came into being. I would draw a most careful distinction between the Church and the Hebrew people. I know there are senses in which we may speak of them as constituting in a bygone economy the Church in the wilderness, the assembly, the ecclesia in the wilderness. But here was the birth of the Christian Church. In this moment the units were baptized by the Holy Ghost into unity. From this moment you have no longer a group of individual men brought near geographically, kept near sentimentally; but you have rather a number of units made near and one vitally by the baptism of the Holy Ghost. That is the Christian Church. The Christian Church is not a fortuitous concurrence of individuals admiring an ideal, or who decide, as among themselves, that they will obey an ethic. The Christian Church is a holy company of men and women who have been baptized by the Holy Ghost into living relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. That baptism of the Spirit took place in the upper room, and these men became the Church. Coincidentally with that baptism they saw tongues parting asunder, as of fire; and by that token God gave unto them, and unto us for all time, the true symbol of the Christian Church. I sometimes feel that we have suffered almost incalculable loss in that we have forgotten this fact, and that the Church of God has made the gravest mistakes by selecting symbols other than the Divine one as representing herself and suggesting her nature and her mission. The Cross is not the symbol of the Christian Church; yet for generations we have made it our symbol, putting it upon our buildings, incorporating it into our art, wearing it as a sign. There are those who wear it as an ornament and at the same time live in ungodliness, that is blasphemy! I am not now thinking of these, but of devout souls who wear it as a sign. I think I am right in saying that the men's movement in the Episcopal Church wear as their sign a Maltese cross. There is a sense in which I like to see them, for I like anything that confesses definite Christianity - that is why I love the Salvation Army uniform - but the Cross is not the true symbol of the Christian Church. In the history of the Christian Church Satan never gained a more signal victory than in the hour in which he made men forget that the tongue is the true symbol of the Church.

Why is it that I thus affirm that the cross is not the symbol of the Church? Because the cross is not the final thing; absolutely necessary, no one will misunderstand me; but not final. The Cross was the instrument in time whereby sin did ultimately manifest itself, and God's central point wherein He did reveal the fact that grace is mightier than sin, and can triumph in love. "It is Christ that died, yea rather, is risen again." If you would have a truer symbol, something nearer to the actuality of the case, you must have a symbol, somehow, of an empty grave with the stone rolled away; but even that is not final. The symbol which suggests at once the nature and office of the Church is the tongue of fire.

Think with me of how simple and remarkable a thing this is. Consider the symbolism of the tongue as apart from the fire. It is a theme I can only suggest. I have not the time, nor would it be the place generally, to discuss the power of the tongue. In the broadest outlook, I pray you remember that man is peculiar in his power in this fact, that he is endowed with language, and that through the medium of thought expressed in language, all things begin to be, of good and of evil, in human history. All the history of human advancement is the history of the use of the tongue. Behind it there is thought, but thought has ever been expressed powerfully and prevailingly by the tongue. Among men there are many different circumstances and surroundings, manners, and maxims and methods, laws and languages, but the fact of the ability to speak and to express by means of the tongue is universal.

Think for a moment of the power of speech. Think what a power the tongue has been in dealing with vast masses of people. Think of the more wonderful power of the tongue in dealing with individuals. Let me take an illustration from English political life. There is a man who is largely out of sight in English political life now, Joseph Chamberlain. I never heard him speak in public, that is my loss. Those who did, know how he was able to influence multitudes. But I have sat with him in quiet committee work, and there he was one of the strongest men in persuasive speech I have ever known. I have known him sit down with a committee of twelve men gathered around him, ten of whom came entirely opposed to his view. Before the hour was over twelve men voted for him. It was the power of speech, the power of a strong man, a strong thinker, having strong convictions, and able so to state his case as to communicate his convictions. You can have a strong man and strong thinking and strong conviction without persuading other men; but the power of speech is that of so presenting conviction and viewpoint as to capture other men. It is but an illustration. I take it from that sphere because I want to indicate the fact that this is one of the greatest powers of humanity, and because we have so largely lost sight of it in the Christian Church. The power of the tongue in the propagation of the evangel of Jesus Christ has been supreme. The history of preaching is in itself enough to make any man proud that God has called him to be a preacher. There is nothing mightier in the history of the world than the history of preaching. Let the mind travel back over the Christian era; mark the great hours, the new movements, the advancements, and you will always find the preacher there!

Think of the power of personal speech, expressing thought, repeating thought, arguing thought, until the central citadel is captured, bent toward the King, and made receptive of the evangel. There is no power like it. This whole company of men and women baptized into living union with the Lord Jesus Christ felt in the thrill of that new baptism the desire to speak, and the symbol of their new office was that of the tongues parting asunder, as of fire, and it sat upon each of them! The use of the tongue in the work of Jesus Christ is supreme, the Church's mission in the world is to make Him known, and she is to do it by the tongue, and that in a three-fold exercise: the tongue of praise that sets His glory forth, the tongue of prayer that speaks to Him and through Him to the Father concerning all human need, the tongue of prophecy that declares to men the will of God. In that moment when the Spirit came there was created in history a new institute of praise, of prayer, and of prophecy. The Church of God became the central institute for the praising of His name, that in which all the praise of creation and of the world should become articulate. The Church of God became a new institute of prayer, that in which priests, intercessors, should find the right of way into the very sanctuary of the Most High to speak of the burdens of humanity, and plead the cause of the suffering and oppressed. The Church of God became a new institute of prophecy, an institute made up of men and women who should come from the secret place of the most high, where they had listened to the ways and the will of God, and passing out among men should proclaim that way and will, and declare the fact of His redemptive mercy.

But whether they praise or pray or prophesy, observe that the instrument is the tongue. In that symbol was focused the thought of the purpose of the existence of the Church on earth. The Church is to witness, to speak, in praise and prayer and prophecy, the great things into the experience of which she herself has come. That is the business of the Church, not the business of an order within the Church, but the business of the entire Church. Every individual member of the Church of Jesus Christ baptized into relationship with Him, sharing His life, feeling the thrill of His Spirit, desires to talk about it, unless that desire be quenched, refused, hindered until it perish. In that hour in which you first consciously yielded to the Lord, or felt the mastery of His Lordship, you desired to speak of the experience. I put it in the two ways because I think they cover two kinds of experience. There is a man here somewhere who could take me to the very spot where he gave himself to Christ, he could take me down to a pew in some chapel in the country and say, right there, on such a date, at such an hour, I gave myself to Christ. Another man here has no such experience, but there was some hour somewhere, somewhen, perhaps in the midst of ordinary life, when the consciousness of the relationship to Jesus Christ swept over his soul. Be the experience the first or the second, the first outcome of it was a desire to tell someone, generally the nearest and dearest; the father to tell his boy, the brother to tell sister, friend to tell friend, the desire to talk of these things. The tongue fired by the baptism of the Holy Spirit is God's method for proclaiming to the world the evangel of His Son, and it is the perpetual unchanging symbol of the Christian Church, the symbolic expression of the oft repeated word of our Lord, that we are witnesses.

Of course, as we have often seen, but which it is not our subject now to dwell upon, yet which ought to be mentioned, behind the witness of the lip there must be the witness of the life. But there must also be the witness of the tongue. Have you ever spoken to anyone about your Lord and Master? I should like to dwell upon it at some length. You will be very much surprised, if you begin to speak for your Lord, at how many men are eager to hear you that you thought cared nothing about Him. Talk to multitudes if God calls you; but if not, then to individuals: the power of the tongue in individual speech is ultimately more wonderful than the power of the tongue in dealing with vast audiences.

But now let us notice that the symbol is that of a tongue like as of fire. Let us read our Bibles accurately. Someone wrote to me recently that these were tongues of actual fire, and that men still received them, and knew it because they had experienced burning sensations in their bodies! As though men could ever apprehend a spiritual force carnally! It is the carnality of this modern movement that is its condemnation. "Like as of fire."

One's mind travels back through the Bible and remembers how perpetually and fittingly fire is the symbol of God. This was so in the burning bush, the bush that was burned with fire but not consumed. Out of the mystic flaming glory of the burning bush there came the voice, "Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground." When, presently, the devout, persistent inquirer asked what was the name of the God of the bush, the answer came, "I am that I am." The symbol of Himself by which He chose to arrest the attention of the shepherd in the wilderness was that of fire filling the bush, but not consuming it. The inclusive declaration of the New Testament is full of value: "Our God is a consuming fire." But if I would have the true interpretation of the fundamental suggestiveness of the symbol I go back once more to the passage I read from Isaiah, which can never be read, it seems to me, without producing in the soul a sense of majesty and awe. The young prophet was in the early part of his ministry, the throne of Judah was vacant for the first time in the life of the prophet: "In the year that king Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up." What was the consciousness that came to the prophet's soul in the presence of the unveiled glory of God? "Woe is me! for I am undone; because I am a man of unclean lips and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips." Then there flew one of the seraphim, and bringing the live coal from off the altar touched the lips of the man and said "Lo, this hath touched thy lips; and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged." After that came the challenge of God, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" and that man, his lips cleansed by fire, said, "Here am I; send me."

The symbolism of all that is not that the fire is mere inspiration or energy; it is a cleansing agent, it was to cleanse the lips of the man that the seraphim touched them with the live coal. Tongues of fire, the fire is that which cleanses the tongue. Let me read you something by way of contrast from the epistle of James:

"The tongue also is a little member, and boasteth great things. Behold, how much wood is kindled by how small a fire! And the tongue is a fire; the world of iniquity among our members is the tongue, which defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the wheel of nature, and is set on fire by hell."

What a strange contrast! What an intended contrast! The tongue is an instrument, needing inspiration, always finding inspiration in fire to make it prevailing; and the fire is always either a polluting or a purifying force, which depends entirely upon whether the origin of the fire is the heaven of God or the hell that is underneath.

How powerful the tongue becomes when set on fire by hell. What mischief it can work in families! What mischief it can work in communities! What reputations it can blast and damn forever! What disaster it can work among the nations! A whispering tongue set on fire by hell can put two nations at war with each other.

Over against all that stands this symbol of the tongue of fire, holy fire, fire of the Divine Being, fire that cleanses, purifies, energizes, inspires with an influence high and holy and noble. What victories it can win! What breaches it can heal! What comfort it can bring! How it can knit man and man, and create the fellowship of believing souls! The tongue of fire - it must be of fire, and it must be of this fire.

That leads us to our last thought, the teaching of the symbol concerning the interrelationship between the tongue and the fire. The tongue is distinctly human, the fire is wholly Divine. The tongue of fire is the human instrument, surcharged, inspired by the Divine nature. It suggests the union Of God and man for the specific purpose of witnessing, declaring, beseeching; as though God did beseech you by us, we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. That can be said without producing any effect. It needs the tongue of fire to say it. The human word, the Divine power; the human speech and the Divine power, cleansing, revealing, persuading.

The phrase employed concerning the apportionment of the gift is suggestive. Tongues, plural, "like as of fire; and it," singular, "sat upon each of them." One fire parting asunder into tongues: "It sat upon each one of them," that is not merely a statement that upon each head there was a tongue of fire, but a statement that upon each head a tongue of that which was one fire.

Upon whom did the symbol rest? Upon men and women. And if you pass on, you have a quotation from Joel which Peter claimed to have been fulfilled in this experience: "Your sons and your daughters shall prophesy. … Yea and on My servants and on My handmaidens in those days will I pour forth of My Spirit." What a revolutionary thing the coming of the Spirit of God is!

"Your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams." Visions have to do with things that are still to come; dreams have to do with things that have happened. The old men in the power of the Holy Ghost shall speak of the past so as to enable us to understand it. The young men in the illumination of the Spirit shall speak of the future so as to enable us to act today. Tongues of fire.

What, then, are the great truths of this symbolism? That the Church is God's instrument of declaration and of witness. That every individual member of that Church is responsible in a measure for the proclamation of the power of the Holy Spirit. That human weakness is utter and absolute. That until there be the touch of fire there can be no proclamation that will prevail, but that there is no lack of equipment if we are in very deed children of God. Pentecost is not past; it is present. The day of spiritual power was not yesterday; it is to-day. While we have, and while we ask, no visible sign such as this, yet in this very hour of our worship we may have the presence and power of the selfsame Holy Spirit. In proportion as we realize what it is to be a member of Christ and of His Church, and are submitted to this in-dwelling Spirit, the Paraclete, the Advocate, the Comforter, in that proportion we shall be prepared to declare, announce, witness, and by the human tongue cleansed by the fire of God, inspired by the fire of God, He will win His victories and establish His Kingdom.