

The Lamp of Prophecy

or

Signs of the Times

by

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CHAPTER TWO

THE CALLING AND DESTINY OF THE CHURCH

"I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Ephesians 4:1-3).

I. THE FOUNDING OF THE CHURCH

IN VIEW of the exhortation of our text, we naturally raise the question, What is the vocation wherewith we are called? And that leads us to turn to various portions of the New Testament to consider what the Spirit of GOD has been pleased to reveal concerning that marvelous mystic society to which every believer in the Lord JESUS CHRIST has been joined by the Holy Spirit. What is the church? How do we become members of the church? What are our responsibilities as belonging to the church? What is the destiny of the church of GOD?

I want to be very elementary and shall begin at the beginning by turning to the first place in the New Testament, where we read of the church - Matthew 16. Here, immediately after Peter's remarkable confession, "**Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God,**" we read, "**and Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona, for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven, and I say also unto thee that thou art Peter [thou art a piece of rock] and upon this rock [I take it this rock refers to the blessed truth that CHRIST is the Son of GOD] I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.**"

Notice, "**I will build My church.**" Observe, our Lord JESUS CHRIST did not here speak of something that was in the process of building. He did not say, "I am building My church," or "I have been building My church," as though it had been in course of construction either throughout the centuries before CHRIST came into the world or during the time He was on earth as man, but He spoke of the building of the church as something still in the future.

"The gates of hell [that is, the gates of the unseen world] shall not prevail against it."

I get great encouragement from that statement of my Lord, that the gates of hell shall not prevail against the church that JESUS builds. Sometimes people are very pessimistic regarding the future of the church. They see atheism and unbelief rolling in like a flood and the cults and isms appearing like mushrooms, and they are afraid that the true faith of the church of GOD will be over-thrown by all these things, but we have the assurance of the Lord JESUS CHRIST that so long as the church of GOD shall remain in this scene it will remain undefeated.

Dr. Campbell Morgan says in this connection, "It not only suggests that the church will be able to hold her own ground to the end, but also will be able to wage an offensive warfare."

An army does not take the gates of the city out to war with it, and the church does not sit on a hill and the gates of hell surround her, but the church of GOD is a conquering army carrying on a battle against the powers of hell and they shall not prevail against her. A right-thinking man does not shut his eyes to the signs of the times and will not be ignorant of Satan's devices, but he knows that greater is He that is in us than he that is in the world and the church of JESUS CHRIST will not retire from the scene a defeated company.

Here CHRIST called it "**My church**" for the first time.

- He was not speaking of any separate company.
- He was not speaking of any particular sect or denomination.

He was speaking of the aggregate of the redeemed in this dispensation of grace and called them "**My church.**"

Now let us look farther: there were saints of GOD in the world from the beginning, right down to the time JESUS uttered these words. In a sense these saints constituted churches. Stephen spoke of the people in the wilderness as a church, an assembly, but we must distinguish between any such companies and that unique company that CHRIST called "**My church.**" This church of which He spoke could not come into being until He had died on the Cross, had been raised from the dead, was received up into glory, and sent the Spirit down into the earth, which He did at Pentecost.

Matthew 18 records the next place CHRIST spoke of the church, and this time it is about discipline in the church, and it would apply just as well to the congregation of Israel. He used the word "**church**" here in a narrower sense than He did in chapter 16. He spoke of trespass.

"If thy brother trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone-if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more . . . if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church."

This is not very often done now. The command is to tell it to the called out company, not to the whole world. The church here is not the aggregate of all the redeemed but a local company in any given place. We are not able to tell it to the whole church of JESUS, but, meeting with a

company of believers in a given place, which company of Christian people is an assembly of saints, we should go to them and bring the matter before them, and they will act on behalf of their glorified Lord.

There is not one other word regarding the church in Matthew.

CHRIST presented Himself to Israel as the promised Messiah, but all the way through He met with increasing rejection until in chapter 23 He announced their rejection (vs. 37). In these words our blessed Lord brought home the solemn truth that GOD, for the time being, was through with Israel as a testimony in the world. "**Your house is left unto you desolate.**"

He came presenting Himself as the promised Messiah. They refused to acknowledge His claim, even though they had to go to the length of imputing the works of His power to Beelzebub, and in that He saw the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. From this point on, Israel, as the people of GOD, had no longer any standing before GOD. They will have, by and by, when they are gathered back again and the Lord works upon their hearts and the veil is taken away, and when the Lord returns in glory they will cry, "**Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.**" This is redeemed Israel. But, between the moment that the Lord uttered these words and that time, their house would be left desolate.

It has often been said that in the Book of Acts we have GOD still dealing with Israel and calling out from Israel a remnant people, and that He never gets to the end until we get to the last chapter of that book, I believe this view contradicts the words of CHRIST recorded in Matthew. Everything was settled; their trial was ended.

What then was He doing? In Acts we find, after the death, resurrection, and ascension of our Lord, the advent of the Holy Spirit to become the vicar of CHRIST here in this world, and to gather together in one the children of GOD that are scattered abroad, and to baptize into one body those of Israel and those of the nations who receive the Lord JESUS CHRIST as their Saviour.

In accordance with the divine order, it is necessary that this message first be preached to Israel so that they may side with Him instead of against Him. Every Israelite who accepts JESUS CHRIST puts himself on record as taking sides with the One whom the nation rejected and the people abhorred, and these find in Him a new place, and by the reception of the Holy Spirit are linked with CHRIST.

In the first part of Acts the greater part is the calling out of this elect remnant of Israel, who forego the earthly hopes of Israel and accept the heavenly calling instead. In due time the Gospel message was broadened out to the Gentiles, starting with Cornelius, when the Holy Spirit fell on them, and then linked these Gentiles and those of Israel who had accepted JESUS CHRIST into one body, and then the message broadened out to the ends of the world, and assures all who believe of their union with CHRIST.

II. THE CHURCH AS THE BODY OF CHRIST

The Apostle Paul was the one chosen of GOD to unfold this teaching in the largest way. He was

not the only one to whom this truth was revealed, but he received the largest revelation (See Ephesians 3:1-6). Paul did not write by consultation with other believers, not even with the original Twelve, but he received his message as a direct revelation from CHRIST. The word rendered "**mystery**" here means, not something peculiarly difficult and mystical, but a sacred secret made known only to initiates. The mystery Paul speaks of is something not found in the Old Testament, not proclaimed by the former prophets; it is something new. It was revealed to a body of holy apostles and prophets. In GOD's due time it was opened up to the other members of the apostolic band and those associated with, them. It is the special truth of what GOD is doing in this age, taking people from among the Jews and Gentiles and uniting them by the Spirit's baptism into one body. Into what body? The body that had been formed on the Day of Pentecost. There was no other body into which the Gentiles could be brought.

"That the Gentiles should be made fellow heirs." Fellow heirs with whom? Those Jews who were already converted. They entered into partnership with the Jews. Paul said, "**whereof I was made a minister** [of this]." It was to tell the Gentiles who believed in the Lord JESUS CHRIST that they are no longer strangers and foreigners to the covenant promises of GOD but are made fellow citizens with the Jews of the household of GOD.

"Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ."

I like the humility of Paul. What a lowly place this mighty man of GOD was willing to take!

The implication is clear the Gospel had already been preached among the Jews and many had believed, and now in a special sense it was given to him to go out and proclaim it among the Gentiles that they might enter into the same testimony and have the same blessing.

"To the intent that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God."

This is unto angelic hosts, unfallen beings, who look on redeemed men and women and learn the riches of CHRIST.

Here are saints on earth, since the Cross and Pentecost - many Jews, others Gentiles, come to the same common ground, GOD meeting them all as sinners approaching Him through the redeeming blood of CHRIST, which are cleansed from every stain, given a new life and nature, and are indwelt by the Holy Spirit Himself, and then everyone is linked up by the Spirit with their risen, glorified Head in Heaven, and so intimate is that union that they are as close to Him as the members of my body are to each other.

The principalities and powers looking down on the world and seeing the work of GOD here, that is, grace picking up sinful Jews and Gentiles and making them one in CHRIST, are the angels who glorify GOD for the work He is doing, and they learn the wisdom of GOD. This is what GOD is doing now. This body relationship is spoken of in Ephesians 4:15-16:

"But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the Head, even Christ: from whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which

every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love."

There you have this corporate union with CHRIST. He is the Head, and every believer is occupying some place in that body.

I do not know what part of the body I am. The members of my physical body do not know what part they are. The consciousness is in the head; so with the spiritual body, the consciousness is in the Head up yonder, and He knows what each one is placed there for. My brethren, what a wonderful thing it is for each member to be in good working order! If one member of our body is not functioning right the whole body suffers, and so Scripture says of CHRIST's body, if one member suffers all the members suffer with it, and if one be honored, all the members rejoice together. If you are not going on with GOD and living for Him, if your life is not a godly life, you are like some member of the body out of order and failing to function. If you are living for GOD and walking with GOD, you may not be conscious of it, but you are a help and blessing to all the other members.

III. THE CHURCH AS A BUILDING

We are not only pictured in this wonderful Epistle as members of the body of CHRIST, but in Ephesians 2:19-22, we are pictured as each one part of a building. Here we have our heavenly citizenship. Here is a new household:

"Now therefore ye are no more strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints, and of the household of God; and are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone; in whom all the building fitly framed together groweth unto an holy temple in the Lord; in whom ye also are builded together for an habitation of God through the Spirit."

Believers constitute that spiritual house.

Notice how he used the word "**fitly**."

- in chapter 4, "**fitly joined together**,"
- in chapter 2, "**fitly framed together**."

A master builder is very careful that every stone fits properly, that every board is properly fitted together, otherwise the beauty and perhaps the safety is marred. It is the work of the Spirit of GOD fitly to frame the building together. Peter speaks of us as lively stones come to the Living Stone and thus are builded together into an house of GOD.

IV. THE CHURCH AS THE BRIDE OF CHRIST

Ephesians 5:22-27, 30, 32:

"Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the

body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish . . . For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones . . . This is a great mystery; but I speak concerning Christ and the church."

Here he has changed the figure. You do not sanctify and cleanse your body to present it to yourself; it is part of you. He has changed the figure from the body to the bride, and I dare say as he penned these words he thought of Hosea when he was commanded by GOD to do something that was most repugnant, to illustrate GOD's dealings with Israel, and typically the Lord's dealing with the church. He had to go to the slave market to buy his wife, and the Spirit pointed her out. She was vile, filthy, contaminated, and a slave, but he took her and cleansed and clothed her, and presented her to himself, and yet she was not faithful to him, and he had to buy her back again. This is a picture of Israel. She is called the bride of GOD, and later on the wife. These are just symbols. CHRIST has to cleanse the church in order to present her to Himself a glorious church without a spot or wrinkle. It is a figure of a wife presented to her husband.

"We are members of His body, of His flesh, and of His bones."

This reminds us that when Adam received Eve he said, "**she is bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh.**" Paul is now quoting (verse 31) from Genesis. Paul is here telling us that the mystery of marriage illustrates the relationship between CHRIST and the church.

We have seen the church then as a redeemed company, as the body of CHRIST, as a glorious building in which the Spirit of GOD dwells, and as the bride soon to be presented to the Lamb, Who died to redeem her. That in itself speaks of her destiny.

V. THE DESTINY OF THE CHURCH

What, then, is the destiny of the church of GOD?

Ephesians 2:4- 7:

"But God, who is rich in mercy, for his great love wherewith he loved us, Even when we were dead in sins, hath quickened us together with Christ, (by grace ye are saved;) And hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus; That in the ages to come he might show the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus."

Sitting in heavenly places does not mean we are now sitting together "**with**" CHRIST JESUS. Now we are sitting "**in**" CHRIST, not "**with**." "**With**" CHRIST will be our happy portion by and by when CHRIST comes and takes us home, that in the ages to come He may show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us through CHRIST JESUS. Show means that He might exhibit. The church, then, called out of sin and darkness, redeemed to GOD with the precious Blood of CHRIST, and linked to the Head with the Spirit, will be one with CHRIST

throughout all the ages to come, and so whatever experiences our Lord may be called upon to go through we shall go through with Him. We shall reign with Him and be with Him when He is all and in all. Our portion will be with Him through all eternity.

Let us, therefore, walk worthy of the calling wherewith we are called.

~ end of chapter 2 ~

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