

The Dispensation of the Spirit

by G. Campbell Morgan

The sermon explores the significance of the Day of Pentecost and the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church and the world, preparing the way for the return of the King.

Scripture: Acts 2:1

Topics: "Holy Spirit", "Church Formation"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan discusses 'The Dispensation of the Spirit,' emphasizing the transformative role of the Holy Spirit following Christ's ascension. He highlights the significance of Pentecost, where the Spirit united believers into the Church, marking a new era in God's relationship with humanity. Morgan explains that the Spirit's work is twofold: revealing Christ to believers and preparing the world for His return. He stresses that the Spirit is not merely a visitor but a resident within the Church, actively guiding and empowering believers. The sermon concludes with a call to recognize the Spirit's ongoing work in both the Church and the world.

Transcript

We now come to deal with the central circle in our Chart, marking the present dispensation. The thin line continued across it, is golden instead of green, shows that God's chosen people are now of heavenly, rather than earthly, character. Above is a line which marks the present High Priestly work of Jesus Christ in the heavens, this line having its purple or pristely side toward the earth. The device of a divided tongue of fire shows that the whole dispensation is of that Spirit.

Let me remind you of the events immediately following the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. There was the resurrection from among the dead; and then the forty days which He spent among His disciples, every day of which undoubtedly had some very definite meaning. It is of the greatest interest to trace His appearances during that period to various persons, upon different occasions, in different places and ways. The ten days of waiting, between His ascension and the ushering in of the Spirit's dispensation, were for the disciples days of weakness and foolishness. These men whom Christ had called to Himself had no wisdom to know what to do, even if they had possessed the power to accomplish anything. God, in infinite wisdom, left them for ten days, enjoining them to wait for "the promise of the Father," and until they were endued with "power from on high." We are all familiar with the story of Pentecost and its effects upon these men in the upper room: the rushing mighty wind, filling the whole house where they were assembled, and the appearance of parting tongues of fire sitting upon each of them. The wondrous power,

that came upon Christ's followers, the new Spirit that possessed them, and the marvelous deeds of early apostolic days are well known to every one of us. It is our aim to get a general view of the whole dispensation thus inaugurated.

By His coming at the day of Pentecost upon that company of men and women in the upper room, the Holy Ghost formed the Church of Jesus Christ. There had been no Church prior to that coming of the Spirit. Individual Jewish disciples had gathered around the Lord during the days of His ministry, and He prepared them for the ushering in of this wondrous dispensation. As they gathered together day by day in the upper room, they were a collection of separate individual souls; but "when the day of Pentecost was fully come, and the Spirit fell upon them, He united them into one whole body, the Church of Jesus Christ. The Spirit came to create the Church, to be the bond of its life; and, from that time to this, men have only entered the Church of Jesus Christ through the new creation of the Spirit. Avoiding anything like controversy, we still find it necessary to say in passing, that no person was ever admitted to the Church of Jesus Christ by water baptism, or by votes of members. There can be no admission into spiritual union by that which is purely material. We admit persons into Church fellowship, not in order that they may become members of the Church of Christ, but because they are already such. For the sake of a very important distinction, I repeat that by the coming of the Spirit the Church was formed; and that same Spirit has, from that day to this, admitted into the Church of Jesus Christ such souls as, convinced by Himself, have believed upon Christ and have been therefore born again of the Spirit. So began the dispensation in which we live.

What is the difference between the Spirit's relation to this present dispensation and to former ones? This question is very important; because we are in danger of imagining that God has, in some way, been working in sections of Himself while dealing with men. This is not so: the Spirit had direct dealings with every dispensation that has passed away. Psalm xxxiii. 6:

"By the word of the Lord were the heavens made;

And all the host of them by the breath of His mouth."

There can be very little doubt that, in order to carry the true sense of the word there to English readers, breath should have a capital B, as referring to the Holy Spirit; and, in that declaration of the Psalmist, we have the union of God the Father, with the Word of God, and the Spirit of God in creation. Gen. vi. 3:

"And the Lord said, My Spirit shall not strive with

man forever, for that he also is flesh."

I do not refer you to that verse to deal with it in its setting, to which I make only passing reference. It is continually being quoted as applicable to this dispensation and to individual life therein. Sermons have been preached from this passage, to prove that God now withdraws His Spirit from living men. Such use is contrary to Scripture, and a denial of the great lines of order upon which God proceeds and from which He never deviates in His dealings with men. In its setting, it plainly refers, some one hundred and twenty years before the event, to the time when judgment should set in by the Flood. But I quote it to show that in the old dispensation God dealt with man by His Spirit for special reasons and on particular occasions. Num. xi. 25:

"And the Lord came down in the cloud, and spake

unto him, and took of the Spirit that was upon him,

and put it upon the seventy elders; and it came to pass that when the Spirit rested upon them, they prophesied."

The Authorized Version adds, "and did not cease"; but the Revised Version makes an important alteration, "they did so no more." The elders only prophesied when the Spirit was upon them. We read further that when Eldad and Medad, who were not ordained, began prophesying (verses 27-29):

"There ran a young man, and told Moses, and said, Eldad and Medad do prophesy in the camp. And Joshua the son of Nun, the minister of Moses, one of his chosen men, answered and said, My lord Moses, forbid them. And Moses said unto him, Art thou jealous for my sake? Would God that all the Lord's people were prophets."

Why did these men prophesy? Because the Spirit of God had come upon them. The Spirit on the elders made them prophets; but when He was taken from them, they ceased to prophesy. Forgive the use of a word to which I particularly object, but I employ it in its common acceptation: the Spirit upon the laity made them prophets. (It is high time that we drop the unholy distinction between clergy or ministers and the laity). The Spirit came, of old, that men, in or out of orders as God chose, should become His messengers to the age in which they lived.

Another interesting reference to the work of the Spirit in the old dispensation occurs in Exodus xxxi. 1-5:

"And the Lord spake unto Mow, saying, See, I have called by name Bezalel, the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah: and I have filled him with the Spirit of God." What for? "In wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all manner of workmanship, to devise cunning works, to work in gold, and in silver, and in braes, and in cutting of stoned for cutting, and in carving of wood, to work in all manner of workmanship."

The anointing of the Spirit to be a brassworker, carpenter, stonecutter, and everything else! Would to God we believed it, in this day, more than we do! In the old dispensation, men who had special work to do were fitted for it, even to the details of material things, by the coming upon them of the Spirit of God. Such illustrations might be multiplied; and they form a most interesting study.

Under the old dispensation the Spirit was given to certain men for specific work or the delivery of special messages; and when the work was done, He was withdrawn. He was then, if I may use the phrase, a visitor to men, coming by the will of God, accomplishing the Divine purpose. But godly men of those days looked for something further, even in connection with the Spirit of God. Here is a prophecy containing a promise made to them:

Joel ii. 28--30: "And it shall come to pass afterward, that I will pour out My Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, your young men shall see visions: and also upon the servants and upon the handmaids in those days will I pour out My Spirit."

That was a promise made to the old dispensation, but not fulfilled in it; and it is a supreme instance, but not the only one, of such a promise. Jer. xxxi, and the wondrous chapters toward the close of Ezekiel's prophecy, show how men of old waited, not only for the coming Messiah, but for the giving of the Holy Ghost, as never before.

From Creation through the reign of conscience, on to the period of law, the Spirit worked among men upon occasion, convincing of sin, revealing the will of God, fitting for specific service to be rendered to God-; but that was all. Pentecost, however, was a fulfillment of the prophecy in Joel. Peter, speaking to the assembled crowd concerning the sights which they had seen and the sounds which they had heard, said, in answer to a criticism from some in that crowd (Acts ii. 14-16):

"Ye men of Judaea, and all ye that dwell at Jerusalem, be this known unto you, and hearken to my words: For these are not drunken, as ye suppose, seeing it is but the third hour of the day. But this is that which was spoken by the prophet Joel."

At Pentecost the Holy Spirit came in His fullness as He had never come before, to be for this dispensation not a visitor but a resident in the Church. That event was equal in importance to the Incarnation itself, was closely allied to it, and was its direct consequence. Bring together those remarkable statements: "The Word was made flesh" ; "I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh." Now that Divinity has come to humanity, and humanity in the person of the incarnate Logos is linked to Divinity the Spirit of God can be poured out upon all flesh. The two events are so closely joined in essence that neither can be correctly understood apart from the other. By the coming of that Spirit on the day of Pentecost as the result of the finished work of the Son of God, we enter upon the Spirit's dispensation-that in which we live today.

The Holy Spirit is to-day the Revealer and the Administrator of the absent King Whom the world still rejects. Never let it be forgotten that we are living in a world which has cast out the King. We are the direct descendants of the people who joined in saying, "We will not have this Man to reign over us." The fact that the earth has cast Him out abides unto this time; but God, in grace, has turned the wrath of man into that which praises Him, taking hold of human failure and transforming it into Divine victory. The heavens have received the King for a time; but while He is hidden from the eyes of men for awhile, the Living One is being made real to all peoples of the earth in this generation. How? By the living Spirit, the Holy Spirit of God, the Administrator of the King in His absence. He makes Christ, and not Himself, the consciousness of the believer. His one work is to up lift, unveil, reveal Jesus to the hearts of His people ; to realize within the character of those who are born again all Jesus is, by bringing them under the blessed rule of the King Himself.

Sometimes friends ask me to recommend them a book upon the Holy Spirit. My reply is, "Read John's Gospel, chapters xiv. to xvi. ; for there you have weighty statements concerning the Holy Ghost from the lips of the Master Himself." Take xiv. 16:

"I will make request of the Father, and He shall
give you another Comforter."

In Scripture there are untranslatable words, having in them infinite depths of meaning, which can never be put into any number of words; and this term, "the Comforter," is one of them. You may make it Intercessor "or "Advocate," if you will; but it means both, and infinitely more than the two together. It is the word which reveals the work of the Spirit in the life of the believer. Verses 16, 17:

"And I will pray 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; for it beholdeth Him not, neither knoweth Him: ye know Him ; for He abideth with you, and shall be in you."

Verse 26.-"But the Comforter, even the Holy Spirit, Whom the Father will send in My name, He shall teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said unto you."

So that the one work of the Spirit of God is to teach things concerning Christ, and to bring to remembrance and understanding the words which fell from His lips. This proves that there is a twofold aspect of the Spirit's work- truth which I can now only outline. First, there is His work in the world and with the people of the world; and then there is His work in the Church and with the people of the Church. Read the word of the apostle in 1. Tim. iv. 10:

"For to this end we labor and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, Who is the Saviour of all men, specially of them that believe."

We see, then, that the work of Jesus Christ has a twofold aspect-He is the Saviour of all men, He is the Saviour specially of those who believe. If therefore the Spirit of God comes to take up Christ's work, to apply it and make Him real, the same double office will characterize the Spirit's operations. Because we have lost sight of this truth, some have fallen away from the hope of the Church-the return of our Lord Himself.

First, there is the work of the Spirit in the Church; then His work upon all flesh. Referring again to Acts ii., the Spirit fell-upon whom? Upon the waiting disciples, baptizing them in His fullness, filling them as He came, equipping them for life and for service by His coming, creating by that inflow the Church. But presently the little company broke up and went from the upper room, and as Peter preached to the crowd, the people were moved and swayed. How? By Peter's preaching? Assuredly not. If Peter had preached the day before, he might have uttered the same words, but they would not have produced that effect. How, then, was the crowd swayed? The Spirit of God was dealing with it; for Peter's preaching was in power and in demonstration of the Spirit. What is demonstration? Making plain. Peter uttered what he had to declare-his witness concerning the Master-and the Spirit made it plain to those who heard. It is such demonstration of the Spirit which still marks the true sphere of preaching. How often some of us have labored to make the Gospel simple: and what an endless pity it is that we do not leave such work to the Holy Ghost! I sometimes feel that in our passionate desire to make God's word plain we may be thwarting the Divine purpose and hindering the Divine activity. When the Holy Spirit equips a preacher, He gives him words; while the preacher who is responsive, utters the word, the Spirit makes it plain. That is what Paul meant when he said that he had not come to the Corinthians with enticing words of man's wisdom, but with the story of the Cross, made clear, real, and forceful, by the Spirit of God Himself.

For a moment let us look more closely at the twofold nature of the Spirit's sphere. What He is doing in the Church we have already seen in the reference which has been made to John xiv. 16-He is the Comforter. If we turn to chapter xvi. 13,14, we get a very important statement.

"Howbeit when He, the Spirit of truth, is come, He shall guide you into all the truth: for He shall not speak from Himself."- What wonderful words concerning the Spirit of God!-" but what things soever He shall hear, these shall He speak: and He shall declare unto you the things that are to come."

The next verse declares the work of the Spirit in the Church-

"He shall glorify Me: for He shall take of Mine, and shall declare it unto you."

Beloved, how much do you know of Jesus Christ-how much of the beauty of His character, of the tenderness of His love, of the majesty of His person? All that you have learned concerning Christ, you know only by the teaching of the Spirit of God. No man can call Him Lord save by the Spirit; and no man can know Him save by the Spirit. The first work of the Holy Ghost, then, is to make Christ to the believing heart

" ----- a living, bright reality,

More dear, more intimately nigh

Than e'en the sweetest earthly tie."

That being the work of the Spirit in the believer, truth becomes to us, not a commodity to be stored, but a great sanctifying, purifying force in our lives. When the Spirit of God comes to the soul and says "Jesus is Lord," the soul responds Jesus is Lord." It is not that the soul has found out a secret, but rather that it has passed into a new realm of life; and the whole of its being goes down before the Lordship of Jesus thus revealed. So, from then until now, the Spirit has been revealing Christ and reproducing Him within the characters and lives of the members of the Church.

Is that all of His work? Nay; look again at John xvi. 8-11. Here you have the larger outlook upon the Spirit's operations. Jesus says:

"And He, when He is come, will convict the world in respect of sin, and of righteousness, and of judgment" -not "to come."

If I can impress that upon you, it will be something done. That passage is continually being misquoted, by the addition of the words to come." The force of the statement may be gathered from our Lord's own explanation:

"Of sin, because they believe not on Me; of righteousness, because I go to the Father; of judgment, because the prince of this world hath been judged" NOT "shall be."

It is not of judgment to come, but of judgment past, that the Spirit is to convict the world.

The work of the Spirit in the world, as distinct from the Church, is that of bringing men into direct contact with Christ in these three particulars.

i. Sin. Because He is the Saviour from sin, refusal to believe in Him is the specific sin which lies at the root of all others.

By belief I do not mean an intellectual assent to the historic statements concerning Him, but the surrender of the whole being to Him in perfect confidence. Unbelief, then, is the attitude of life unsundered and disobedient.

ii. Righteousness. Because He has ascended to the Father, righteousness is now possible to all who believe in Him. Thus belief is not only for the putting away of sin, it is also for the bringing in of righteousness.

iii. Judgment. He has judged the prince of the world, and henceforth all who believe in Him share His triumph over evil.

The great enemy of the race has been bruised by the Saviour of men.

The demonstration of these truths to men is the work of the Holy Spirit. How did you find your way to Jesus Christ? Using some sermon, tract, or other human instrumentality, the Spirit convicted you of sin, of righteousness, and of judgment accomplished by the Cross; and you, through Christ, entered freely into the region of purity, power, and blessing.

In our present dispensation the Spirit of God is doing this twofold work; He is selecting-I use the word without a moment's hesitation, but you may use the word "electing" if you please-the members of the Church of Christ; but He is doing infinitely more. He is preparing the whole earth for the return of the King, as in every land He works through the disciples of Christ. He is thus undermining false religions and preparing the hearts of men.

Nations are getting ready for Christ. For example, the messengers of the Cross have influenced the great teaching centres of India, where thousands are flinging away false religions. Alas! that many such should be drifting into agnosticism and atheism. We can almost hear the footfall of the King as He comes to bring in all the wondrous dispensation which is to succeed this present preparatory one. Look where you will, and you find triumphs of the Cross by the power of the Spirit's work, and there are signs of readiness on every hand for the dawn of the day of God and the advent of the King.

Let us remember, then, that the twofold work of the Spirit is to make Jesus real to this age. He does this in the Church, by revealing Christ increasingly, growingly, progressively to believers, that they may be transformed into Christ's likeness. He does it in the world, by preparing everywhere for the return of the King.

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