

The Message of 2 Corinthians

by G. Campbell Morgan

The second letter to the Corinthians reveals the ministry within the Church and the ministry of the Church, with a focus on the authority, message, resources, and experiences of the Christian minister.

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 5:18

Topics: "Ministry", "Reconciliation"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan emphasizes the profound teachings of 2 Corinthians, focusing on the ministry within the Church and its divine authority, message, resources, and experiences. He highlights the importance of the Church's role in perfecting the saints for effective ministry in the world, urging both ministers and congregants to recognize the sacredness of their responsibilities. Morgan stresses the necessity of loyalty to the Word of reconciliation and the sufficiency of God, while also addressing the trials and triumphs faced in ministry. Ultimately, he calls for a return to the sanctity of the ministerial office and the Church's commitment to living out the message of reconciliation.

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"We are Witnesses."

It is quite evident that the second letter to the Corinthians is a sequel to the first. There is a marked difference between the two. The first is systematic; corrective and constructive. The second seems to be characterized by lack of system; it is largely personal, and emotional; it throbs with a sense of anguish, and yet perpetually rises to the height of great and gracious song. The matters dealt with were of an immediate and local kind. The writer was suffering from personal misunderstanding, resulting from personal misinterpretation; and evidently wrote to set himself right with those who had misunderstood him because of this misinterpretation. The letter was also concerned with a certain collection which was being made; and with the apostle's proposal to visit Corinth.

All this is not to undervalue this letter, for it is impossible to read it without feeling that in some senses, perhaps a little difficult to explain, there is in it a note and a quality of intense spirituality almost beyond that of the first letter. This note of intense spirituality results from the fact that the matter of his own personal misunderstanding and misinterpretation; the matter of the collection in Corinth on behalf of the poor saints in Jerusalem; and the matter of his proposal to visit them, and his reasons for not visiting them when they expected he would; are all set in the light of the great Christian conceptions.

The essential message of this letter is discovered as we recognize these great conceptions. We find in it the recognition and revelation of certain truths that are of vital importance to the Christian Church.

In our consideration of the message of the first letter we found that the spirit of the city had invaded the Church; and by that invasion the Church had become unfitted for fulfilling its true functions of ministry in the city. The message of the letter, therefore, was one of warning against the perils of the city to the Church; and one calling the Church to fulfill its function in the city.

In this second letter we have the same two pictures. Again Paul wrote to the Church of God in the city of Corinth. As in his first letter he called the Church to fulfillment of its ministry in the city; in his second he dealt with the ministry within the Church, by which the Church is to be perfected, in order to the fulfillment of its ministry in the city. This is peculiarly, therefore, the letter of the ministry, taking that word in its fullest

sense. Whenever ministry is dealt with in the New Testament, the ultimate thought is not that of the ministry of the men we call ministers to-day, but that of the ministry of the whole Church. That is not to undervalue the sacredness of the ministerial calling within the Church; but to reveal its deepest meaning. Within the Church there are ministers, created by gifts bestowed by the Holy Ghost; and the business of such ministers is that of the perfecting of the saints, in order that the Church may fulfill its ministry in the city.

With that key to the situation, I understand the passion in the heart of Paul; the reason of his trouble, the reason of his tears, the reason of his anxiety. He knew that the Church at Corinth was failing to understand the true function of the ministers of Jesus Christ, and was failing to obey the teaching of those ministers; and therefore was failing to fulfill its own ministry in Corinth. He was not fighting for official recognition. He was not angry because some did not think as highly of him as of Apollos or Cephas.

In this letter then we have a picture, for all time, of what the ministry within the Church is ; and of what the ministry of the whole Church ought to be. Therefore the central teaching has to do, first, with the ministry within the Church; and secondly, with the ministry of the Church ; principally with the ministry within, for the ministry of the Church had been dealt with in the first letter, and appears here again only incidentally, though quite clearly.

Dealing first then with the ministry within the Church: we notice in the first place the apostle's teaching concerning the authority thereof, in his opening words; "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus through the will of God, and Timothy our brother." Carefully notice how he brings into association with himself a man who is not an apostle. He had to fight for his own apostleship as against the misunderstanding and misinterpretation even of some who were apostles; but Timothy was not an apostle ; he was an evangelist certainly, and in all probability ultimately a pastor and teacher. Thus two men were associated in the writing of the letter, and presently Paul referred to Silvanus, and also to Titus. All these were in the ministry by Divine appointment. That is the New Testament conception of the authority of the Christian ministry. I am not now discussing the methods by which the Church of God recognizes the gift bestowed, prepares for the exercise of it, and solemnly ordains to work within the Church. All these are necessary and important matters, but the form which these arrangements of the Church may take is of minor importance. The supreme value of this letter, in the matter of the authority of the Christian ministry, is its revelation of the fact that a man is in the ministry, whether it be as apostle, prophet, evangelist, or pastor or teacher, by the appointment of God. That fact creates his authority, and consequently the authority he exercises must be the authority of the One Who appoints him, and the authority of the One Who appoints him is always the authority of His Word spoken. The authority of Jesus was the authority of His teaching. The multitudes heard Him utter His Manifesto, and they were astonished, because He taught as One having authority. It was the authority of inherent and essential truth which captured them. The authority of God is always the authority of His Word, the authority of essential Truth. The authority of the minister is not the authority of an office conferred; it is the authority of the Word that is committed to him to preach; that great and sacred deposit which he holds on trust for the Church, and by exposition of which he perfects the Church for its work of ministry.

This leads us naturally to what this letter teaches concerning the message of the minister. The apostle says, "We are not as the many, corrupting the Word of God: but as of sincerity, but as of God, in the sight of God, speak we in Christ" ; and later, "Therefore seeing we have this ministry, even as we obtained mercy, we faint not: but we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the Word of God deceitfully; but by the manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every

man's conscience in the sight of God." The message then of the apostle, prophet, evangelist, pastor, and teacher, is the Word of God, which must not be corrupted, not handled deceitfully.

Between these essential declarations, the supreme glory of the Word to be preached is revealed; it is that of the unveiled glory. There was a ministration of death in the case of Moses. The ministration of life and the Spirit came through Jesus Christ. The apostle claimed that the same results follow the preaching of the Word by Christian ministers of the Word as followed the ministry of the Lord Himself. Therefore that Word is the burden of the message of every Christian minister. The difference between the apostle, the prophet, the evangelist, and the pastor and teacher, is not a difference of message, but a difference of emphasis and application. Whether the work be apostolic, pioneer work, in exposition of the doctrine; or prophetic, which makes application of the truth of God to the age; or evangelistic, which repeats the message, and woos men to allegiance to Christ; or pastoral and didactic, which feeds and instructs the flock; the message is always the Word of God, the Word of this unveiled glory in the face of Jesus Christ, the Word of Spirit and life.

Next in order we have in this letter a revelation of the resources of the Christian minister. Of these there are three, and the first is dealt with at length in the first chapter; it is that of the comfort of God. This becomes more wonderful as, reading on through the letter, we see the experiences through which the apostle had passed, and what he had proved of that comfort in circumstances of testing and trouble and trial. The first resource of the Christian minister is always that of the comfort of God.

As we get to the end of the letter, we find him making his boast in visions and revelations; that is, in the fact of personal, first-hand, direct, immediate speech of God to his own soul. It is to be observed that these visions and revelations were not for publication. In all probability fourteen years had passed before he made any reference to these visions and revelations; and then he declared they were not lawful to be uttered; but they completely captured his life, and kept it bent in the true direction, so that there was no possibility of doubt or fear. I believe that men still have visions and revelations; but I am always suspicious that a man who is anxious to talk of visions is suffering from nightmare. The true vision and revelation cannot be talked about. Even when at last, compelled by the misunderstanding of this Corinthian Church, to refer to them, the apostle apologized, saying: You have compelled me, I am bound to boast now. He could not, however, explain the experience. I may have been in the body or out of it, I know not, God knows; I saw things and heard things that I cannot tell.

Let any man in the ministry feel that there is something lacking, unless in the hour of lonely communion with God there flame before him such visions, that he never can tell, but which, abiding with him, create the note of his confidence and authority, and inspire his determination to prosecute the work of his ministry to the end.

The final resource of the minister is that of the prayers of the saints; and the apostle declared that, not only by this exceeding comfort of God, and not only by visions and revelations; but also by the prayers of the saints had he been delivered. The value of such prayers cannot be overestimated; and those who are in the ministry know them to be among the most powerful and prevailing sources of strength.

Again the letter is a remarkable revelation of the experiences of the Christian ministry. These are described in three notable passages which are so graphic that they need little exposition. Let us read them.

"We have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the exceeding greatness of the power may be of God, and not from ourselves; we are pressed on every side, yet not straitened; perplexed, yet not unto despair; pursued, yet not forsaken; smitten down, yet not destroyed; always bearing about in the body the dying of Jesus, that the life also of Jesus may be manifested in our body."

"In everything commending ourselves, as ministers of God, in much patience, in afflictions, in necessities, in distresses, in stripes, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labours, in watchings, in fastings; in pureness, in knowledge, in longsuffering, in kindness, in the Holy Ghost, in love unfeigned, in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the amour of righteousness on the right hand and on the left, by glory and dishonour, by evil report and good report; as deceivers, and yet true; as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as chastened, and not killed; as sorrowful, yet alway rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things."

"I take pleasure in weaknesses, in injuries, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake; for when I am weak, then am I strong."

These are the experiences of the Christian ministry. There is experience of tribulation. That is a subject not perhaps to be dealt with in detail in the great assembly; yet one which we all need to face. Is it not true that the Word of God only becomes truly quick and powerful, full of solace and help, when spoken by such as have suffered? I say this, not that any should seek the pathway of suffering, but that the man to whom is committed the preaching of the Word, and who is in the midst of buffeting and bruising and suffering, may know that by such processes the Word of God from his lips will become quick and powerful. I had a young friend who was brought to God, through His good grace, by my ministry. He devoted himself to the ministry. I never heard him preach until his college days were over. Then his sermon was wonderful, brilliant, sparkling in eloquence. When it was over and we were in the private seclusion of home, I asked my wife what she thought of the sermon. Her reply was: It was wonderful; but it will be better when he has had some trouble. I never heard him again until he had stood by the side of a grave, and his heart had been smitten; and oh, the difference! It is through tribulation that the Word of God becomes powerful. I think I would hardly dare to write that, but it may be that some brother in the ministry may read this, who is in trouble. God help you, my brother! It is by the pressure on the earthen vessel that the light flames through. It is by the hour of sorrow that we become instruments able to convey to the people of God the message that heals and helps.

Tribulation is not all of the experience of the minister of the Word. He has an experience of hope; of perfect confidence; there is always a song in his heart if he preach the Word of God; and he has also an experience of triumph, for He leadeth us everywhere in triumph.

With the aim of the Christian minister we need not tarry, having already seen in another connection that it is that of the perfecting of the saints, unto the work of ministering. We are only successful in the measure in which the result of our ministry is the larger ministry of the Church in the city.

Neither need we stay to consider at any length the ministry of the Church, that having been the burden of the first letter. We need only stay to remind ourselves of our responsibilities as to equipment and exercise.

The Church's equipment for its ministry is that of obedience to the Word which is preached; separation from the world which is to be saved; and conformity to the will of the Lord which is revealed.

The Church is to exercise its ministry by seeing to it that it puts no occasion of stumbling in the way of the Word ; by seeing to it that it is living a life of reconciliation to God ; by seeing to it that it does not receive the grace of God in vain.

Or to summarize the whole suggestiveness of this letter in this respect, the Church of God fulfills its ministry when it incarnates the truth to which it listens. The responsibility of the Church towards the minister is not that of obedience to an official; but of obedience to the Word of God which he proclaims.

The abiding appeal of the letter is patent. It appeals to those of us who are in the ministry within the Church, to be loyal to the message of the Word of reconciliation. "All things are of God, Who reconciled us to Himself through Christ, and gave unto us the ministry of reconciliation; to wit, that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself." That is the all-inclusive harmony of the evangel. It has many notes, many tones, many emphases, many applications; but that is our message; and this letter calls us to be faithful to it.

It calls us also to absolute rest in the sufficiency of God, and to acceptance of the principle of the Cross. "We have this treasure in earthen vessels," and the measure in which the treasure in the earthen vessel is communicated to those who need it is the measure of the pressure on the vessel. The sacrificial note must be in the life of the preacher, or his preaching is in vain.

Finally, this letter teaches us that the true relationship of the minister to his people is first that of disinterested independence; and secondly, that of dependent interest.

The final appeal of this letter is to the Church as to its own ministry; and that is crystallized in the words, "Be ye reconciled to God." The measure in which the Church is composed of men and women who are living the life of reconciliation, is the measure in which the Church is declaring the evangel of reconciliation to the world. Are we reconciled to God? Fundamentally, as to standing, if we are Christian men and women we are reconciled; but experimentally, as to state, are we reconciled? Is there controversy between us and God, something that breaks in upon the experience of reconciliation? By that controversy we are rendered unable to proclaim the evangel of reconciliation in the city. The Church reconciled experimentally, living in fellowship with God, is the Church that preaches the gospel of reconciliation. Therefore the final word of appeal is, "Receive not the grace of God in vain."

There is a twofold application needed at the present hour. First to the Church. The Church needs a return to recognition of the sacredness of the ministry. I use the word ministry now in its more restricted sense. There has been an appalling tendency amongst us to degrade and forget the sanctity of the office of the minister of the Word of God. We serve tables altogether too much; and are unable to give ourselves to the proper ministry of the Word. We allow ourselves all too constantly to be deflected from the main line of our endeavor; and find that we have been so busy doing excellent nothings that we have been able to do nothing excellently.

The minister of the Word needs to get back to the fact that his burden is the Word, and his business is to preach it. His toil is to know it, and he cannot trifle with it without degrading the sacredness of his office. Oh, for the tears and the travail of Paul! As I look at him, my soul is often ashamed, because I seem to lack the brands of Jesus.

There must be return to recognition of the sanctity of the ministerial position by the Church itself. She must come to understand that those whom God has appointed to this ministry have a responsibility to Him, and

that the Church has a tremendous responsibility of obedience, not to the minister as an official, but to the Word of which he is the messenger, the expositor.

There must therefore be acceptance of the responsibilities of reconciliation and of grace. There must be discipline of the sinning brother, but there must be his restoration after he has repented. There must be recognition of unity, and if the poor saints in Jerusalem are suffering for lack of material things, then the grace of giving must be exercised by the wealthy church at Corinth, and she must give, not as though the giving were a charitable addition to her activities, but out of a heart of love.

Is there any application of this letter to the world? None; save that if the Church of God, and the ministry within the Church, are not true to the ideals, they had better hide this letter from the world ; because if the worldly man shall read this letter, and then look for the marks and the signs, what an appalling disaster if he do not find them!

So may we all in this ministry learn its secrets, obey its call, and fulfill the purposes of our Lord.

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