The Preeminence of the Apostles in the Church

Matt. 13:54 - 19:2

In the fourth narrative, both the apostles and the church take on greater significance. The narrative begins with the rejection of Jesus by his own people in Nazareth. He had come "into his own country, he taught them in their synagogue." But the people of Nazareth said: "Is not this the carpenter's son? is not his mother called Mary? and his brethren, James, and Joses, and Simon, and Judas? And his sisters, are they not all with us? Whence then hath this man all these things?" To this Matthew adds, "And they were all offended (Gk. skandalizo) in him." The Greek word skandalizo means to stumble because of a trap or stumbling block that is put in the way. The people of Nazareth could not accept Christ because their familiarity with him became a stumbling block. In response to this, the Savior said: "A prophet is not without honour, save in his own country, and in his own house" (13:54-57). This incident foreshadows the future rejection of the Savior by the Jews before Pontius Pilate. Of this rejection, the Apostle John said, "He came unto his own and his own received him not" (John 1:11).

The rejection of Jesus by his own is followed by the story of the beheading of John the Baptist (14:1-12). Not only does this story show the rejection of John but also forecasts the Savior's death.

The Preeminence of Peter and the Apostles

The next few stories in chapter 14 may have been included by Matthew to deal with the question that might have entered into the mind of his reader: "With John the Baptist gone and the death of Christ pending, who will shepherd the church?" The query is first answered in the story of the feeding of the five thousand (14:15-21). Upon hearing of the death of John, the Savior withdrew to a desert place -- apparently to be alone! But multitudes hearing he was there flocked out to see and hear him. His compassion upon the shepherdless sheep caused him to teach them and heal their sick (14:13-14).

As evening came on, the apostles urged the Savior to send the multitude away that they might purchase food. But he said: "They need not depart; give ye them to eat." But the multitude, which consisted of 5,000 men plus their wives and children, seemed to large a group for the apostles to feed since they only had five loaves of bread and two fishes. But the Savior said: "Bring them hither to me." He, who had rejected the temptation to make bread at the insistence of Satan to prove to him his divinity (Matt. 4:3), was now going to make bread to feed the hungry multitude. In the multiplication of the loaves and fishes, the Savior not only feed the multitude physical food, but foreshadowed the feeding of the church spiritual food through the instrumentality of the apostles. It should be noted that
Matthew carefully describes that after the Savior took the bread and fishes, he looked up to heaven where God is and blessed the food, then he "gave the loaves to his disciples, and the disciples to the multitude" (14:15-21). It was in the Lord's plan that the apostles should "feed" the church under the direction of the Savior. This story established the line of authority: God, the Savior, the apostles, and then the multitude.

Having established the preeminence of the apostles in the church, the next story shows the preeminence of Peter among the apostles. The episode of the Savior walking on water is recorded by Matthew, Mark, and John. However, only Matthew informs us that Peter alone of the apostles had faith to walk on the water (14:22-33). And though his faith waned in a moment of opposition, Peter was nevertheless sustained by Christ and with his help Peter continued to walk on water. To his readers, Matthew seems to be saying that Peter, alone, is sustained by Jesus Christ to head the earthly church.

**Tradition vs. the Higher Law**

In chapter 15, Matthew records a controversy the Savior had with the Pharisees and scribes concerning the traditions held in the oral law, called in these verses "the tradition of the elders" (15:1-20). It is clear that the Savior would have the disciples and those who would follow them reject the rigidity of the Pharisaic rituals and follow a higher righteousness. This is reinforced through the story of the healing of the gentle woman's daughter (15:21-28). Pharisaic legislation would have only found contempt for the gentle woman but in this story the Savior had compassion on the woman solely based on her faith, an example of higher righteousness. This incident is followed by the feeding of the 4,000 which once again foreshadowed the shepherding of the church by the disciples (15:32-39).

**How to Gain True Testimony**

One of the main issues of chapter 16 centers on how the testimony of the divinity of Christ is granted. The chapter begins with the Pharisees and Sadducees (a curious combination!) confronting the Savior by asking for a "sign from heaven" proving his messiahship (16:1-12). To their request the Savior replied: "A wicked and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign." Then to the disciples the Savior issued this stern warning: "Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees"; a clear indication of the Savior's disdain for the religious practices of the Jewish leaders. Reception of divine testimony does not come as a result of hypocritical practices. How testimony is given is shown in the story of Peter's confession (16:13-20). In response to the Savior's query to the apostles, "But whom say ye that I am?", Peter declared, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Of this testimony, the Savior said: "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven": thus revealing that divine testimony comes by revelation from God and not by spectacular manifestations or physical evidences. The Savior then noted that it would be on the foundation of this kind of revelation that he would "build his church." This is the first use of the term church in Matthew. At this point the Savior declared that he would give the "keys of the kingdom" to Peter. The keys of the kingdom are the right
to rule the kingdom of God on earth. Thus, the story of Peter's confession is not only another demonstration of Peter's prominence among the apostles but also shows the growing importance of the church.

**Keys of the Kingdom Given**

Peter's preeminence is again illustrated in two of the three stories found in chapter 17. In the first, Peter, along with James and John, were taken by the Savior to a high mountain where the Savior was transfigured before them (17:1-13). Then appeared Moses and Elijah who gave to Peter, James, and John the keys of the kingdom which had previously been promised. Of this holy experience the three apostles were given the charge "Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man be risen again from the dead." Of this experience, Elder Bruce R. McConkie said: "Then it was, on the snowy mountain heights, after the Father had spoken from the cloud, that Moses and Elijah, both taken to heaven without tasting death, had come in their corporeal bodies to a temple not made with hands, and given for that day and time their keys and powers to Peter, James, and John." (Ensign [May 1983] pp. 21-23).

Following the experience at the Mt. of Transfiguration, the story concerning the healing of the lunatic (17:14-21) was recorded to demonstrate the continued need for greater faith on the part of the apostles. In the final story, Peter is shown prominence among the disciples when those who collected the "tribute money" or temple tax came to him to ask if Jesus paid the tax (17:24-27).

**4th Discourse**

(Matt. 18:1-19:2)

In the fourth narrative, both the apostles and the church grew in importance. In the fourth discourse, the Savior discusses several issues relative to the church and its leaders. The first issue concerns humility (18:1-5). The Savior used a child to demonstrate the kind of humility required to be not only member of the kingdom but a leader therein. Said he: "Except ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (18:3-4). Amid the qualities that demonstrate the humility of a child that are necessary for a member of the church and a leader therein is the attribute of absolute dependence upon a higher power. This is especially true regarding the atonement. An infant who dies in its infancy, is utterly dependent upon the atonement of Jesus Christ for salvation (see. Mosiah 3:16). The infant is not capable of doing any works that could save him or herself. And just as a child is dependent upon Jesus Christ for salvation, so man must "humble themselves and become as little children, and believe that salvation was, and is, and is to come, in and through the atoning blood of Christ, the Lord Omnipotent" (Mosiah 3:18).
Causing Little Ones to Stumble

The aim of the next concern was "offences" or causing someone to stumble (18:6-9). The Savior warned that anyone who causes "these little ones" (i.e., converts to the new kingdom) to stumble, or be led astray, "it were better that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea." The word millstone mentioned in this passage is the English rendering of the Greek words "mylos onikos" which means "donkey millstone." These were large round stones (about three foot in diameter) that required the power of a donkey to turn the mill. This kind of a stone placed around the neck of someone would carry them immediately to the bottom of the sea.

In relation to this, the Savior reiterated what he said in the Sermon on the Mount: "Wherefore if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off." This concept may be viewed in two ways. Not only should members of the kingdom avoid sin of every kind but those who commit extreme sin and cause others to do so should be removed from the body of the church.

The Savior then spoke of the treatment of members of the church, especially those who are the lowly members of the kingdom (18:10-14). Of these he said, "Take heed that ye despise (Gk. kataphroneo, to look down on, treat with contempt, condemn, despise, disdain, think little or nothing of) not one of these little ones." In other words, the apostles were not think of members of the church, whether the be little children or new members, as beneath them or that they are better than the common member. To reinforce this idea he told the parable of the lost sheep: "How think ye? if a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that [sheep], than of the ninety and nine which went not astray."

Then interpreting the parable, the Savior said: "Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish."

Dealing With the Sinner

The topic of the discourse is shifted from those who cause others to stumble to those who have themselves stumbled (18:15-20). The leaders are told to confront those who have sinned in an effort to reclaim them: "Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother." If they choose not to repent then they will be no better than "a heathen man and a publican."

The question any leader would ask concerning one who sins was asked by Peter: "Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? till seven times?" Then Lord taught that the disciples ought to forgive others as often as they are sinned against: "I say not unto thee, Until seven times: but, Until seventy times seven" (18:21-22). To increase the faith of his hearers in this regard, the Savior told the parable of the unmerciful servant.
(18:23-35). In the parable the servants debt of 10,000 talents was equated with each man's sin - an insurmountable debt. The 100 pence debt (a reasonable debt) was equated with the most another may do against them. The point of the parable was that since God has forgiven the disciples of their sins (something they could not do for themselves) they should therefore from their hearts forgive "every one his brother their trespasses."