

# AGAPE LEADERSHIP

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LESSONS IN  
SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP  
FROM THE LIFE OF  
R.C. CHAPMAN

Robert L. Peterson & Alexander Strauch



P. O. Box 64260, Colorado Springs, CO 80962

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*Agape Leadership*

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## Preface

*Help, Lord, for the godly man ceases to be,  
For the faithful disappear from among the sons of men.*  
— Psalm 12:1

As we move to the close of the twentieth century, we desperately need examples of what Christian leaders are to be like. Robert Cleaver Chapman (1803-1902) provides an extraordinary example of such leadership—agape leadership. Although little-known today, he was a widely respected Christian leader in England during the last century. What he was best known for was his remarkable life of godly love.

Chapman was a pastor, a teacher, and an evangelist. He was a strong leader and visionary, as the results of his life's work amply demonstrate. But his leadership style did not violate God's loving and gracious principles of leading. The spirit in which God's work was to be done—not just the results—was of paramount importance to him.

Several years ago, we asked Dr. Robert L. Peterson to write a fresh, thorough biography of Robert Chapman. Mr. Peterson is a research physicist, a dedicated church elder, and a man of sterling Christian character. When Mr. Peterson had nearly completed his work, we realized that a large, detailed biography of Mr. Chapman may never receive the exposure it deserves

because he is unknown to many. So we decided that a smaller book was first needed to introduce people to this remarkable man of God.

With Mr. Peterson's gracious permission, we asked Alexander Strauch, author of *Biblical Eldership*, to select choice portions from Mr. Peterson's forthcoming book and arrange them in topical order. Thus this book is not strictly a biography. It is a selection of biographical snapshots from Chapman's life that illustrate godly pastoral leadership in action. In the same way that George Muller, the famous orphanage director and Chapman's close friend, inspired thousands of Christians to pray and have greater faith in God, we desire that Chapman's life will challenge believers today to a life of supernatural, God-given love.

It is our hope that this book will touch your heart, transform your thinking about how God's work is to be done, and encourage you to be more like our wonderful Lord Jesus Christ.

The Publisher

## 1

## Agape Leadership

*If I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries  
and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to  
remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing.*  
— 1 Corinthians 13:2

The British playwright, George Bernard Shaw, wrote, “Christianity might be a good thing if anyone ever tried it.” Shaw’s sarcastic wit exposes one of our most stubbornly persistent problems—not living what we profess to believe. Nowhere is this problem more evident than in our response to Christ’s teachings on unity, humble-servanthood, and love. We have failed to take Christ’s example and commands seriously. Professor Michael Green, from Regent College in Vancouver, B. C., Canada, states this point pungently:

When we reflect on the history of the Church, are we not bound to confess that she has failed to follow the example of her Founder? All too often she has worn the robes of the ruler, not the apron of the servant. Even in our own day it can hardly be said that the “brand-image” of the Church is of a society united in love for Jesus, and devoted to selfless service of others.<sup>1</sup>

When the Anglican archbishop of Canterbury, Robert Runcie, announced in March, 1990, that he would resign from his position, *The Sunday Telegraph*, a weekly British paper, criti-

cally remarked, “There seems little prospect of finding anyone who would do this impossible job any better; partly, it is because he is a genuinely decent person, intelligent, witty and lacking in pomposity, in a bureaucratic institution full of self-important and ruthless men.”

Addressing his own troubled denomination, but his words could be applied to most other denominations, Southern Baptist pastor Richard Jackson said, “Get a roomful of Southern Baptist preachers together and you’ve got enough ego to blow Washington, D.C., off the map.”<sup>22</sup>

Across all denominational boundaries, religious leaders agree that the crucial problem facing churches today is a crisis of integrity. Financial and sexual scandals among Christian leaders have become almost commonplace. Power struggles and divisions are the norm, not the exception. What is the cause of these catastrophes? It is not hard to identify. As always, it is the destructive pride and morbid selfishness of the human heart. Pride and selfishness, rather than Christ’s principles of humility and sacrificial love for others, control much of what is called God’s work. All too often God’s work becomes a matter of ego, a competitive game, or a ladder to success in the big business of religion.

How easily we forget God’s command: “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others” (Phil. 2:3,4).

More than ever before, we need to pray the prayer of the well-known, eighteenth-century evangelist, George Whitefield: “Oh this self-love, this self-will! Lord Jesus, may Thy blessed Spirit purge it out of all our hearts!”

For those of us who seek to be leaders and teachers of God’s people, Jesus Christ repeatedly insisted that we first be humble

minded, that we not strive for prominence of place or reputation. He calls us to sacrificially serve one another, to forgive those who hurt us, and to treat one another as brothers and sisters in the family of God. We could summarize all these things in one word—*love*.

The love that we are talking about here is God's love, as supremely expressed in Christ's self-sacrificing love on the cross. To express this wonderful love, the first Christians chose the noun, *agape*, and filled it with their new concept of love: God's deliberate, self-giving love that is expressed irrespective of a person's worth or merit. This agape love is to be the distinguishing mark of all Christ's followers. During the last hours of our Lord's life, He gave the disciples a new command. He said, "Love one another, even as I have loved you. . . . By this all men will know that you are My disciples" (John 13:34,35).

God's agape love is essential to the Christian life! In 1 Corinthians 13:1-3, Paul says, in effect, that if we have all the Bible knowledge in the world, if we are the greatest leaders or the most successful missionaries in the world, we are nothing if we don't have love. We are just wasting our time. Any Christian leader, therefore, who is not operating in agape love is wasting his life now and losing his eternal rewards later. If that isn't enough, such a leader is also hindering the spiritual development of the body of Christ.

Every local church is to be a display window for Christ's supernatural love. This love is to flow out of each member of the body for every other member, for the world, and for angels to see. Thus, as Paul E. Billheimer writes,

The local church, therefore, may be viewed as a spiritual workshop for the development of agape love. Thus the stresses and strains of a spiritual fellowship offer the ideal situation for the testing and maturing [of love]. . . . The

local congregation is one of the very best laboratories in which individual believers may discover their real spiritual emptiness and begin to grow in agape love.<sup>3</sup>

The kind of loving, mature church that God intends cannot develop, however, if the church leadership is not operating in agape love. *The local church is not to be a business, social club, or political party; it is the Spirit-indwelt family of God. Just as love is the basic element of a successful family, so love is to be the unifying element of the local church.*

For the best example of agape leadership, which is Christlike leadership, we need only to look at the New Testament letters of Paul. In 2 Corinthians 12:15 he writes, “I will most gladly spend and be expended for your souls.” That is agape leadership in action!

Authentic Christian leadership involves a glad willingness to be expended for the spiritual benefit of another. Robert Chapman epitomizes such leadership. He became legendary in his own time for his gracious ways, his patience, his kindness, his balanced judgment, his ability to reconcile people in conflict, his absolute fidelity to Scripture, and his loving pastoral care.

We all talk about love, but when people hurt our feelings or disagree with us, we often immediately revert to the world’s ways of attacking one another—angry debate, backbiting, and power struggles. Chapman, on the other hand, implemented the principles of agape love while immersed in the hurts and disagreements of life. Moreover, his life exemplified sacrificial Christian living. He constantly gave of himself and his possessions to people in need, especially to the poor among whom he chose to live.

Harington Evans, a well-known and respected preacher of the day, described his impressions of Chapman in a letter to a friend:

R. Chapman has just left us. He slept here last night, after preaching for me at John Street. Oh, what a man of God is he! What grace does he exhibit! Courage, meekness, love, self-denial, tenderness, perseverance, love for souls—all springing out of love of Christ and God—seem beautifully blended together in beautiful symmetry.

No wonder that in Chapman's day, some people referred to him as an "apostle of love." R. C. Chapman is a man we need to get to know. We may not agree with everything that he did or believed. That is understandable. But we should not allow these differences to cause us to miss the outstanding characteristic of his life—*his consistent, Christlike attitude and spirit.*

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### THOUGHTS FOR MEDITATION

*"This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you."*

— John 15:12

*"Now abide faith, hope, love, these three; but the greatest of these is love."*

— 1 Corinthians 13:13

*"Let all that you do be done in love."*

— 1 Corinthians 16:14

*"Above all, keep fervent in your love for one another."*

— 1 Peter 4:8a

*“We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.”*

— 1 John 3:16

.....  
*“When we would consider the love of God in Christ, we are as one approaching the ocean: he casts a glance on the surface, but the depths he cannot sound.”*

— R. C. C.

*“‘God is love’ (1 John 4:16), His children please Him only so far as they are like Him, and ‘walk in love’ (Ephesians 5:2).”*

— R. C. C.

## 2

## Love for God's Word

*If you abide in My word, then you  
are truly disciples of Mine.*

— John 8:31b

**B**orn in 1803, Robert Cleaver Chapman was the son of a wealthy English parents. At age fifteen, Chapman was sent to London to be apprenticed in law. After completing five years of legal apprenticeship, he became an attorney of the Court of Common Pleas and an attorney of the Court of the King's Bench. Three years later, at age twenty-three, he inherited a small fortune and set up his own law practice in London's banking center. Older lawyers praised and encouraged him. A brilliant career in law seemed assured. God, however, had other plans.

During his early teenage years, Chapman had developed a strong spiritual longing that appears to have been unmet in his home environment. Some members of his extended family were strong Quakers; his immediate family appears to have belonged to the Church of England, although their religious orientation is unclear. Soon after he arrived in London, Chapman began to read the Bible—eventually reading it through three or four times. He also read writings by the biblical critics, but was not satisfied with them.

At age twenty, Chapman began to find satisfaction in his spiritual search as well as finding professional success. He became acquainted with a Christian lawyer, John Whitmore. As the two men became better acquainted, they often discussed spiritual ideas. Whitmore soon realized that his friend, who often spoke judgmentally of Christianity, was in fact searching for spiritual answers. So he invited Chapman to attend John Street Chapel, a large, denominationally unaffiliated congregation, where Harington Evans preached.

For the first time in his life, Chapman heard a sermon that touched his heart. He suddenly realized the inadequacy of his righteousness and, in contrast, the great atoning work of Jesus Christ. There, at John Street Chapel, he met the Savior.

Harington Evans began discipling Chapman and took him into the slums for evangelistic work, where they distributed food and clothing to the needy. Within a short time, Chapman became very involved in John Street Chapel. Evans even gave Chapman preaching assignments, but Chapman's friends told him that he had no great preaching gift—he sounded too much like a lawyer!

His initial failure in the pulpit, however, did not deter Chapman. He concluded, "There are many who preach Christ, but not many who live Christ. My great aim will be to *live* Christ." Chapman couldn't have chosen a better goal in life, because no one brings greater pleasure to God the Father than someone emulating His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

A brilliant man, Chapman had many opportunities open to him following his conversion to Christ. He was off to a great start in the legal profession. Using his exceptional gift for languages, he might have been a great writer. Instead, he chose to take God's message of salvation to the poor.

So in April, 1832, Chapman left the legal profession and became pastor of a small, troubled, Baptist congregation at

Ebenezer Chapel in Barnstaple, County of Devon, England. When he moved to this town of about seven thousand people, Chapman was twenty-nine years old. He had been a Christian for nearly ten years.

Ebenezer Chapel was quite different from the flourishing, peaceful John Street Chapel in London where Chapman received Christ and developed as a Christian. The congregation at Ebenezer was so divisive that three different pastors had served there during the previous eighteen months! Despite his excellent training in pastoral skills under Harington Evans at John Street, shepherding the flock in Barnstaple would prove to be a challenging task. To start with, Chapman had to overcome potentially explosive doctrinal differences between himself and the congregation.

It is amazing that Ebenezer Chapel even invited Chapman to become pastor, since he had never been a Baptist and did not share many of the church's strict views. In fact, his personal views on baptism were different from those of the membership! Given the doctrinal tensions between Chapman and the church, the situation at Ebenezer seemed doomed to failure. Chapman was sure to be the fourth pastor to leave in less than two years. But that did not happen.

What was the secret of Chapman's success at the church? He was a man of prayer and God's Word! He knew that the struggles at Ebenezer Chapel were really spiritual battles. He knew that without the Word of God and the power of the Holy Spirit there could be no victory. He knew that only the Word feeds the church and causes it to grow; only the Word protects the church from its archenemy, the false teacher; only the Word leads the church to higher and better ground.

Chapman firmly believed that unless he had the liberty to teach God's Word, there could be no ministry for him at Ebenezer Chapel. So he wisely laid down one indispensable con-

dition before accepting the pastorate at Ebenezer. That condition is best explained by Chapman himself:

When I was invited to leave London and go to minister the Word of God in Ebenezer Chapel, then occupied by a community of Strict Baptists, I consented to do so, naming one condition only—that I should be free to teach all I found written in the Scripture.

To their credit, the people agreed to this condition and Chapman began his life-long work in Barnstaple. Gradually the church changed under Chapman's straightforward Bible teaching and loving, patient, pastoral skills. As years passed, Ebenezer Chapel became Bear Street Chapel—a large, influential congregation of believers.

One cannot teach the Bible unless one knows the Bible. And Chapman certainly knew the Bible! Believing the Bible to be the very voice of God, Chapman spent much of every morning reading the Bible and meditating on what he read. He meditated on the Word until it became a part of his soul. In his *Meditations*, he commented, "It is one thing to read the Bible, choosing something that suits me (as is shamefully said), and another thing to search it that I may become acquainted with God in Christ."

Chapman would not accept a doctrinal position until he was convinced of its compatibility with Scripture. He carefully based his doctrinal positions on his study of the whole Scripture, not just a cursory reading of selected scriptural portions. J. R. Caldwell records:

Mr. Chapman chiefly emphasized the reading of and meditation upon the whole of the Scriptures. He used to say: "Every error may be based upon *some* part of Scripture taken from its connection; but no error can stand the test of all Scripture."

This intimate love of God's Word was obvious to those who knew Chapman. Someone once said, "To hear Mr. Chapman only read a psalm is as good as a sermon." James Wright, who directed the Ashley Downs orphanages in George Muller's latter years, agreed with this statement and added, "Doubtless the flexibility and skillful inflections of his voice had something to do with it, still more, his unusual grasp of the deeper meanings of Holy Scripture. But. . . I believe the true explanation is to be found in the intense reverence for and love of the God-breathed words."

Chapman's own words best express his regard for the Bible:

The book of God is a store of manna for God's pilgrim children. . . . The great cause of neglecting the Scriptures is not want of time, but want of heart, some idol taking the place of Christ. Satan has been marvelously wise to entice away God's people from the Scripture. A child of God who neglects the Scriptures cannot make it his business to please the Lord of Glory; cannot make Him Lord of the conscience; ruler of the heart; the joy, portion, and treasure of the soul. . . . If the Bible be used aright by anyone, it will be to him the most pleasant book in the world.

The Bible, Chapman knew, is God's sure Word and would not lead people astray. Therefore he believed that the Bible should be paramount in one's reading. Without knowing what the Bible says, it is impossible to live Christ.

This lesson is important for us all. We are all prone to neglect the Scriptures, especially in our day with the great proliferation of books and magazines. It is not enough to read religious literature or read about the Bible. We must read, study, and meditate directly and continually on the primary source itself—the Bible. Charles H. Spurgeon, a great Bible reader himself and

a friend of Chapman, wrote, “It is blessed to eat into the very soul of the Bible, until, at last . . . your blood is *Bibline* and the very essence of the Bible flows from you.” Chapman’s blood was certainly *Bibline*.

Chapman’s personal love of Scripture directly affected his teaching ministry. He had found the Bible to be the exclusive, sufficient source book for all of life’s matters. Therefore, his main objective at Ebenezer was to teach the congregation directly from the Bible—something not commonly done in his day. He felt that most churchgoers had received too much teaching on denominational tradition and knew too little about what the Bible said. There was, he believed, a famine in the land, “not a famine for bread or a thirst for water, But rather for hearing the words of the Lord” (Amos 8:11). Similarly, in Hosea’s day the priests failed to teach the Law of the Lord to the people, so the prophet cried out, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6). Chapman certainly did not fail to teach people the Word of the Lord.

In one of his last sermons, Chapman advised parents to not only pray for their children’s conversion, but to pray that they would grow to be well-pleasing children of God who know the Word. “There are so many people who are satisfied with just knowing they are saved.” he said. “Tell them not to be satisfied with this. I want them to study the Word, and grow in the knowledge of God. Tell them I want them to *become intimate* with the Lord Jesus Christ.”

## THOUGHTS FOR MEDITATION

*"O how I love Thy law! It is my meditation all the day."*

— Psalm 119:97

*"But to this one I will look, to him who is humble and contrite of spirit, and who trembles at My word."*

— Isaiah 66:2b

*"Go therefore and make disciples . . . baptizing them . . . teaching them to observe all that I commanded you."*

— Matthew 28:19,20a

*"All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching . . . that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work."*

— 2 Timothy 3:16a,17

*"There are mysteries of grace and love in every page of the Bible: it is a thriving soul that finds the Book of God growing more and more precious."*

— R. C. C.

*"Satan has ten thousand devices for drawing us away from the Scriptures."*

— R. C. C.