**I Will Build My Church**

Matthew 16:13-20

Feb 23, 2014

USF Joint Service with Sojourner Church and Reformed University Fellowship

1. **Peter’s confession of the identity of Christ is of tremendous importance**

“But who do you say that I am?” It is the all-important question. It is the question upon which salvation hinges. It is the controlling thought of this passage. Who is this son-of-man?

The significance of this question being asked here, is not so that the reader of the book of Matthew is introduced to Jesus for the first time. The whole gospel of Matthew has been setting forth the identity of Jesus the Christ. From the very first chapter, we are told by the angel in his announcement to Mary that this is Immanuel. God with us. He is conceived by the Holy Spirit. In accordance with the prophecy of Isaiah, He is Mighty God. He is the Son of God, not in the human sense that the Jews sometimes used that phrase, but in the ultimate sense of the divine person of the Godhead. He has said things that no mere has the right to say. He is the promised Messiah – the Christ - the man who is God. He is Jesus who will save his people from their sins. This is not the first time that the reader is queued in to who he is.

But what is significant here is that this is the first time one of his disciples comes by faith to a full expression: *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*

The importance of this moment is plain from the text: It is the confession of Peter that stirs the Lord to exclaim the beatitude –vs 17 - *blessed are you Simon bar-Jonah*. It the confession that reveals the very hand of God the Father supernaturally at work in Peter: *For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.* It is the confession that marks a turning point in the conversation of Jesus, as verse 21 tells us from ***that*** *timeJesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things …* the cross comes into view with this confession.

It is not merely that Gospel writer is revealing the identity of Christ. It is that we have recorded here the first apostolic witness to the person of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.

It is monumental in the history of God’s redemption of his people. Why? It is bigger than the personal faith of Peter.

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You know we are here tonight as part of a work starting a new church – Sojourner Presbyterian Church. It has been a prayer for more than 10 years, ever since RUF become a thought here at USF: a church to serve the University; a church to serve the surrounding neighborhoods.

This passage has everything to do with church-planting. Church planting hinges upon this work. Evangelism – missionary work – all of it hinges upon this. And I will confidently say that we have no business planting a church if we do not rightly understand the basic concepts of this passage. What we have here is two things: first the *foundation of the* church and second, *the designer’s intent for the church*. Can you imagine the monstrosity of a skyscraper built without a foundation and ignoring the architect’s design? It would sink and lean and ultimately crumble and fall and ruin a whole city.

If we miss the foundation and design of the church, God help us, we would do better to never have attempted this church plant.

And let me go one step further. If you do not rightly understand the church, your perception of the gospel itself is at the very least incomplete, if not warped and twisted altogether.

We won’t be able to cover everything in this passage. Specifically, the keys of kingdom, you will have to study again another. But I want to focus in on verse 18, and I want to begin with the first concept I mentioned:

1. ***The Apostolic Witness is foundational to the church.***

18 *And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church…*

This is the first time Jesus Christ incarnate speaks directly about his Church. It is the first use of the word “church” in the New Testament: the greek ekklesia. You have heard perhaps of the Great Commission of the church. Some have called this passage the Great Constitution of the church.

Now, it has raised a massive question that Christians have wrestled with in church history. The name Peter means “rock.” Christ gives him that name and says, “on this rock I will build my church.” But 1 Corinthians 3:11 says, “For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”

How can that be? Is Peter the Rock or is Jesus Christ the rock on which the church is built?

Rome – the Catholic church understood this passage to give perpetual primacy to Peter. He is seen as the head and foundation of the church on earth. Christ as the head of the church in heaven. And somehow the office of Pope is understood to be transferred on to successive leaders who subsequently are the worldwide head of the church and the foundation.

That is to make a grave error. That is to fail to see the inseparability of Peter and his confession. Peter and his witness to Christ.

Martin Luther saw the significance of Peter’s confession. In 1510 he had traveled as a faithful Monk to the city of Rome. There he witnessed the most outrageous corruptions in the church hierarchy. He was stunned and dismayed out the outright extortion and sacrilege and immorality that happen there. And as he came to grips over the next few years with the gospel of Jesus Christ, he recognized that although the Papacy claimed the lineage of Peter, the church had abandoned the good confession that Peter made. The church had abandoned the truth of the gospel. It had become a monstrosity built upon shifting sands.

The confession is inseparable from Peter here.

When Jesus says, on this Rock I will build my church, he speaks not of Peter alone, but of the whole witness of the apostles. If you want to see this very vividly, In Revelation 21, we have a description of the end of this age when Jesus Christ returns and evil is no more, the new Jerusalem, the city of God is seen coming down out of heaven from God. It is described as *having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.* It is a picture of the church – glorified – purified. And its symbolic foundations come into view to John, and he writes, *Vs 14 …and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.*

The apostles. Not Peter alone. Though Peter was first and honored for that. But Christ’s design was that they be the foundation: in this sense – that their lives would bear witness to Christ. Ephesians 2:20 tells us that the church is *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone.*

*LET ME BE CLEAR:* There is only one Cornerstone. And that is Christ. He is the sole head of the church. There is salvation in no other name. He is the Rock of Ages. He is the temple of God. Don read of him in Isaiah. He is the true foundation laid in Zion. The foundational significance of Peter and all the Apostles is only insofar as they stand as a true and trustworthy testimony to Jesus Christ – who alone is the object of our faith.

That is why we read this about the first Christian in the early church in Acts 2:42 – *And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching….*

You want to be devoted to Christ? Devote yourself the testimony given by the Apostles and contained in the scriptures. They have given a trustworthy and faithful word blessed and sanctioned by Christ himself, breathed out by his Holy Spirit.

***By way of application:*** *This foundation cannot be taken for granted.* It must be held to. It is so subtle how we can slide away from it.

You know, Loren and I bought a house not far from here, and it is rumored that it is a sinkhole area. Sinkholes form so slowly and invisibly, but all the sudden after years of subterranean erosion, the foundation is gone – and the house is swallowed.

The quiet shift from being a Christ-founded church moving outward with mercy - to being a social-cause church, tacking on the gospel to legitimize ourselves.

The quiet shift from being a Christ-founded church earnestly praising God through good music – to being a stylistically defined church attracting people to pleasing aesthetics.

The quiet shift from being a Christ-founded church fostering Christian community – to being a club using Jesus to fulfill our social ambitions.

The quiet shift from being a Christ-founded church humbly being hearers and doers of the word – to a smug church that hears the word and checks the “orthodoxy” box.

Don’t think these are not real dangers. Don’t think that you do not have propensities in your own heart to go in these directions.

When the apostolic testimony – the word of God – slowly edges its way out of the central place in the church, erosion has begun. It happened all over Europe, as 19th century theological liberalism silenced the voice of the scriptures, and the light of the church went dark. It has happened in many of our churches here. Gauge – what place does the Word of God , the testimony of the apostles and prophets – hold in this church. It is the only foundation on which to build.

And it applies to you personally too: upon what do you build your life? Shifting sand – or the solid rock?

May God hold Sojourner upon this foundation.

1. **The design for the church is nothing less than salvation**

Jesus Christ speaks a word of promise here: *I will build my church and….* I want you to consider what he could have said next. He could have finished that sentence with a number of biblical concepts: *I will build my church….and…fill in the blank*

* + I will build my church…and the members of the body will grow into maturity in Christ (like he says in Ephesians 4) – a true dynamic happening within the church
  + *I will build my church…*And a loving community of disciples will arise (Jn 13:35) true characteristic
  + *I will build my church…*And ministries of mercy to the orphan and the widow will be multiplied (Pure and undefiled religion – James 1:27)
  + *I will build my church…*And preaching of the word will go forth (2 Tim 4:2) – vital function of the church.

He says, “ *I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it*”

Now, there are many functions of the church; there are many characteristics of the church. But I believe this brings into view the ultimate saving designs of God in his architecture – his climactic designs in and through his church.

You cannot find more stark words than these: “*the gates of Hell.*” *Let me remind you, there is a reality behind those words*. That is not hyperbole. Jesus uses the Greek word *hades* here. He uses that word to denote the place of eternal torment. And what is in view here is the terrible condition of humanity and its ultimate destruction; fallen in Adam’s sin; each one of us breaking God’s Holy law in thought, word and deed daily; falling short of the glory of God. Romans 6:23 - The wages of sin is death – and that is an eternal matter.

Hades is described as a citadel – a fortress with gates. The preaching of Jesus Christ himself portrays those black gates opened as it were to swallow a world of people unconcerned with eternity and suppressing the truth of God.

Commentators like Calvin and others could not help but see as well - in this statement about the gates of hell - the sentient powers of darkness implied here. There is a Kingdom of Darkness, ruled by Satan. And that kingdom enslaves humanity. If that sounds outlandish and utterly incompatible with your everyday experience, understand that it is a slavery to sinful desire. You are familiar with sinful desire. The Bible teaches that there are spiritual realities behind that.

Yet, the promise of Christ is, *the gates of hell will not prevail against it. T*his promise of the building of the church is nothing less than God’s ultimate design for salvation! Victory over the darkness.

How so? How is it that the church triumphs over hell?

Not because of any virtue of the church itself or her pastors or elders. Not any power of the church or mediatorial ability. The church cannot bring you to God. Attending a church does not save anyone. You can sit in a pew all your life, and be a slave to darkness.

No, it is because of the great Builder of the church – Note the subject of the sentence: *I will build my church*. And who is that subject of the sentence? We are brought back to his question: *who do you say that I am?* - He is *the Christ, the Son of the Living God.*  This is Jesus Christ who himself said, *I died, and behold I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades.*

In his death and everlasting life, he robs hell of its victims. His sacrifice is our salvation. His resurrection is our life.

*Who do you say that he is?* Do you know him? If you know Christ, if you have believed on him turning from your sin, trusting him for salvation – then you have eternal life: *this is eternal life, that they may know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*

If you make that good confession, you stand on the one foundation. And if you are standing on Christ – the one foundation - then he has built you into his Church. You cannot come under the power of his death and resurrection without being built like a living stone into his Church. It is *definitional* for the Christian. It is a matter of your identity! It is an inescapable reality for the redeemed.

This is why no other institution is given this promise. Not eduction, schools, government – not even para-church. It is the church that is promised victory over hell. And the church is Jesus’ victory - It is the manifestation of his wisdom of God on display over and against the cosmic powers of darkness.

The church is no appendix – no add on - to God’s plan of redemption. God has no design for a bunch of saved, loner individuals.

Think of the covenants of the Scriptures. If you are not familiar with the Covenants, they consist of promises and warnings through the history of the world, to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and climactically, Christ. At the heart of the Covenant is this concept:  *I will be your God and you shall be my people.*

That is what hell wars against. I can’t tell you how many people I have talked to from door to door and on the streets who profess to know Christ, but have long since abandoned the church. It is a philosophy of our times that that is ok – that that is acceptable. And it is has the stench of hell all over it.

From start to finish, the theme of the Scriptures tied together by the covenants drives to the Christ’s Church. It is what led a Presbyterian minister, Stuart Robinson to write:

*So far as the Scriptures are historic they are the history of the Church…In so far as the Scriptures are prophetic, it is to foretell the destiny of this community under the administration of its Founder and King….In so far as they are a theology, it is the revelation of a God-man Mediator… with reference to a Church which he has purchased with his own blood. In so far as the Scripture is a gospel, strictly so called, it is the annunciation of a kingdom of heaven at hand.*

The concept of a Christian who voluntarily neglects the church – it is against the whole counsel of the scriptures. And this is why Ch 25 of The Westminster Confession of Faith says, “there is ordinarily no salvation outside of the church.”

Does your understanding of the gospel include the saving purposes of God in and through his church?

**Closing words of application:**

-Where is our confidence and our warrant for church planting? It rests on the Sovereign Grace of God. There is no guarantee that any individual local church will thrive or last any length of time. But with great confidence, we know that the Church of Jesus Christ will flourish in every nation, tongue, and tribe. We know this because Christ has pledged himself to this. And so we do go forward with great expectancy in his name.

-Let me exhort each one of you: students, teenagers, everyone, do you love the church? Do you support it in every way. Do you pray for the church? Can you cry out with the Psalmist (74) – *have regard for your covenant , Arise O God, defend your cause.*

And to speak specifically to this moment - Sojourner Church plant makes no claim to be the only expression of God’s mighty saving work in the University Area. But it is being established out of a deep conviction that God calls us to extend his gospel, and has providentially led us to be here for the University Area. For you students and for many more – as many as who will make the confession.

We are a long way from Caesarea Philippi. Between us and the location where Christ spoke these words of promise are continents and oceans. And yet, here we are. And here is the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ, the evidence of his saving power. Hallelujah! May he receive all the glory for the riches of his grace.