

“Church—Why Bother?”
Matthew 16:13-20
November 4, 2018

INTRODUCTION:

Today’s passage has the first mention of the church in the New Testament. Jesus introduces this topic, and clearly states what makes a church a church. As we will see in today’s passage, a church is made up of those who confess Jesus to be the Christ and the Son of the Living God. We are going to see next week that a church is also made of those who follow a suffering Christ.

Since the church in our culture is much beleaguered, I thought it would be helpful to review why we bother to give attention to this institution that many see as failing. A couple of years ago, the Pew Research Center did an important survey on church involvement. Their conclusion was alarming. “Perhaps the most striking trend in American religion in recent years has been the growing percentage of adults who do not identify with a religious group. And the vast majority of these religious “nones” (78%) say they were raised as a member of a particular religion before shedding their religious identity in adulthood.” What’s more, the percentage of “nones” increases the younger a person is. 35% of millennials list their religious preference as “None,” while only 17% of baby boomers do so and only 11% of those born before 1946. In other words, unless these trends change, time will only further diminish church involvement as older generations die off and younger people continue to opt out of church.

As evidenced by your presence here today, you have likely come to a different conclusion than these “nones.” My desire today is to strengthen your conviction about the importance of church involvement. The forces arrayed against the church have always been formidable, and today is no exception. There are strong forces at work to erode our confidence in the church. I believe the best way to combat these forces is with the truth that comes straight from the mouth of the founder of the church, our Lord Jesus. This paragraph is the most discussed paragraph in the entire Gospel, and Jesus’ statement in verse 18 is the most discussed sentence in Matthew’s Gospel.

I. “I Will Build My Church”

It is not without significance that Jesus refers to the Church as “*My* Church.” In the original, emphasis is given to that possessive pronoun. The church belongs to Jesus. We will occasionally get sales calls in the church office where the caller asks to speak to the owner. I have sometimes been tempted to respond, “He’s on his heavenly throne, and there is no phone line

there. But you can speak to him if you would like. All you have to do is come boldly before the throne of grace in prayer.”

It is common today for people to say that they like Jesus but not his people. Jesus will not permit such an attitude. Imagine someone saying to me, “Brad, I really like you and want to be your friend, but I can’t stand your wife.” No husband who cares for his wife would permit such a friendship. If you have a problem with my wife, then you have a problem with me. The church is the bride of Christ, and if we have a problem with Jesus’ bride, we have a problem with Jesus. That doesn’t mean that the church is without fault. We could all rehearse many faults, both with the Church universal and with our own church, Altadena Valley Presbyterian. The basis of loving the Church is the simple fact that Jesus joins himself to the Church so thoroughly, as a husband and wife join themselves together.

Some will say, “I love church people; it’s just the institutional church that I dislike.” Such an attitude will still bring someone into conflict with Jesus. It is Jesus who forms the church into an institution. Jesus builds his church, and the rest of the New Testament makes it clear that this requires organizational and institutional components like church officers, church government and financial management.

Jesus promises that he will build his church. He acts as the ultimate CEO of his church. Jesus gets to decide such things as who comes to our church, the size of our church and the personality and culture of our church. A fellow pastor recently asked for my advice on how he could go about creating the culture of his church. I told him, “That’s not your job. It’s Jesus job to do that. Your job is to discern the culture Jesus is creating and partner with him in that.” This truth has given me wonderful freedom as a pastor. I used to get anxious about such things as who came to the church, the size of the church and much more. Such anxieties reveal a failure to grasp Jesus’ role as King and Head of the church.

II. “On This Rock I Will Build”

Jesus tells us how he will build his church, saying that he builds on “this rock.” Significant differences exist about the identity of this rock. The Roman Catholic Church says that it refers to Peter and his office as the first Pope of the Church. The Eastern Orthodox and Protestant churches say that it refers primarily to Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God. Most Protestant scholars today understand Jesus to be referring to Peter as he confesses Jesus as the Son of God. Jesus says nothing about Peter’s successors, which makes for a problem with the Roman Catholic interpretation. But Jesus is clearly referring to Peter here, and not just his

confession. Historically, Peter was a significant part of the founding of the Church.

Here's the way I understand this. Jesus is building the Church by erecting a new temple. The temple is the place where God's presence can be found and where God meets with his people. The temple Jesus is building is not one made with stones, but with people. Peter would later write about this in his first epistle. **"You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ"** (1 Pet. 2:5). Peter is the first stone Jesus picked up to build this new temple. Anyone confessing Jesus as the Son of God can be a living stone in this temple.

So Jesus builds his Church with any who will confess him as **"the Christ, the Son of the living God."** What does it mean to make Peter's confession? The first thing it means is to distance oneself from the popular views of Jesus' identity. Jesus begins his questioning of the disciples by asking them, **"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"** Jesus isn't concerned with current polling data. Popularity was never his goal. His point is that common attitudes about Jesus are never correct, even when they are positive. All of the answers given by the disciples were positive, though filled with superstition. They thought he was the reincarnation of famous prophets. It was indeed a high view to think that Jesus was at the level of these great prophets. But it wasn't nearly high enough.

It is similar today. Popular views of Jesus are still largely positive, while falling short of embracing him fully as the Son of God. Covenant Seminary professor Dan Doriani says that in the Gospels, "Jesus makes an implicit or explicit claim to deity in almost every paragraph." He then goes on to point out the only options we are left with concerning Jesus: liar, lunatic or Lord. If Jesus claimed deity knowing he wasn't, then he was an evil liar, causing many of his followers to go to their deaths because of his lies. If he claimed deity thinking he was divine when he actually wasn't, then he is so grossly out of touch with reality and would rightly be judged a lunatic. That leaves the third option: he is who he says, the Lord of all and the Son of God. What is not an option is to judge him positively while stopping short of believing him to be the Son of God. He cannot be merely a good teacher or an inspiring example.

Then Jesus asks the critical question of his disciples: **"Who do you say that I am?"** Notice how bold and decisive Peter is. He didn't say, "I think you are the Christ," as if this was merely Peter's opinion. Nor did he say, "To us you are the Christ," as if Peter was a postmodernist for whom private and subjective truth was all that mattered. No, he declared as if it were settled truth, **"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."** "Christ" means "anointed one," and has reference to Jesus as the true King. "Son of the living God" means that he is divine.

The Church is strong to the degree that it is as bold and decisive as Peter here. That's what Jesus means when he says that "*on this rock* I will build my church." Similarly, you as an individual will grow strong only to the degree that you are able to affirm the same. You don't want to be like the politician who told his audience: "Those are my convictions; if you don't like them, I have others."

This is such an important point that we need to apply it before moving on. Can you confess what Peter confessed here? To confess Jesus in this way means more than knowing the right answer to a theological question. It's more than merely saying, "Jesus is God." It means to live your life in light of this truth. One of the indications that we are not living as if Jesus is Lord is the presence of an angry attitude. Do others think of you as an angry person? When anger becomes our dominant emotion, it is because we are not saying with Peter, "**You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.**" Instead, we are rebelling against his reign in our lives.

III. "The Gates of Hell Will Not Prevail"

So Jesus promises to build his Church, and he does so on the confession of his people that he is the Son of God and Lord of all. He further promises to protect his Church against the onslaughts of the "gates of hell." That refers to the powers of evil, led by Satan, which have often sought to destroy the Church. The gates of hell have won some battles, but they will never prevail in the end because of the rule and reign of Jesus.

J. C. Ryle says that the Church is an anvil that has worn out many a hammer. It is assaulted by persecution from without, by false teaching from within, by sin among its leadership and by compromise with the world. But none of these enemies, in the end, will prevail. Empires come and go, though all of them think they will last forever. Our own nation has been in a place of relative flourishing for quite some time. It will not last, but the Church will. If Jesus tarries in his return, the Church will be here long after America has become nothing more than a chapter in a history book.

IV. "I Will Give You the Keys"

Jesus gives amazing authority to his Church. "**I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.**" What does he mean by this? Keys give access to something which is otherwise locked and inaccessible. And what is it that is locked and inaccessible here? It is the thing everyone wants, the kingdom of heaven. It is the reopening of paradise,

the place where the tree of life is located, by whose leaves the nations are healed (Rev. 22:2). It is the place of everlasting joy, where there will be no more tears and no more death. It is the place where oncologists are going to have to learn a new skill, because their specialty will no longer be needed. It is the place where there will be no more injustice, no more poverty.

The Church is in possession of the keys to this glorious future. Specifically, these keys refer to the gospel, the good news of Jesus. Through faith in Jesus, a new power is unleashed in a person's life. This power is nothing less than the life of Jesus lived out in a person. It changes not only one's future, but one's present as well. Change happens from the inside out, and faith in Jesus effects just such transformation.

But how is it that the Church is said here to be engaged in binding and loosing. I agree with D. A. Carson that it is the binding and loosing of people that is in view here. People are bound if they don't believe the gospel preached by the church, and they are loosed when they do believe it. The keys of the kingdom of heaven are found in the gospel preached by the church.

CONCLUSION:

I want to mention two applications in closing. First, it is our great privilege and responsibility to show the world the glory of this confession Peter made of Jesus' divinity. There is a bias against Jesus, resulting in the common belief that to submit to Jesus means a miserable, diminished life. We are to show by the quality of our life together as a church that it is just the opposite. To submit to Jesus' lordship transforms life in all the best ways. As the Church, we are the outpost of the coming kingdom, the model home of the kingdom of heaven.

That brings me to my next application. Value the Church as Jesus valued her. Give to the Church your best, not your unwanted leftovers. Don't say, "I'll get involved in the church as I have extra time." Rather, say, "I'll make it a priority to use the gifts God has given me in service to his church." Parents, if you want your children to love the church, you must love the church and give it priority in your life. In loving the church, you are loving what Jesus loves.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Matthew 16:13-20

1. We all want our young people to grow up to love the Church when they are adults. What do you think are some of the key components in discipling them toward that outcome?
2. It has been noted by many that while interest in spiritual things is on the increase in our day, interest in the Church is waning. What do you think is the explanation for this?
3. If Jesus were asking us the same question today that he asked his disciples (“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”), how would you answer him?
4. If a church or an individual is strong and healthy to the degree that that person or church confesses the divinity of Jesus as Peter did, what evidence would you put forth in your life that demonstrates such a confession? In other words, are you confessing the divinity of Jesus by your life? Why would you say so?
5. Where do you see in your life evidence that you are not living in a way that demonstrates this confession?
6. How is anger a practical indication of failure to make this confession?
7. Jesus promises that the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church, which indicates that they will certainly try. How do you see the powers of evil attacking the Church today?
8. The Church has been given by Jesus the gospel, which is the key to heaven. How might a greater conviction of this truth make a difference in your life?