

Jesus and the Church

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Hinson

[0 : 00] This past week, a book was released, just came out, called The Great Dechurching. And it's by a couple of guys, Jim Davis and Mike Graham.

They're looking at the research that is coming out about what we have observed to be a very significant and steady decline in people who are involved in church.

And what's really interesting is, this is a large number of people. A lot of this decline is fairly recent. It's happened in the last couple of decades. And it is continuing, if not increasing, over time.

And so they're looking at this and trying to figure out what's going on. And they sort of talk about two groups of people who are de-churched. The first is what they call the casually de-churched.

The casually de-churched are, these are people who, by and large, left good, faithful, healthy churches. They simply left because attending just wasn't convenient anymore.

[1 : 03] There were other activities that started to compete with church, like kids, sports, and things like that. Other things took priority. So they, or they moved to a new place and they just never found a new church.

Or COVID came and they got used to staying at home on Sunday and they just kind of never went back. So that's the casually de-churched. And then they talk about the other group whom they would call the de-churched casualties.

And these are people who left because their churches, they were hurt. They were unloved. They were mistreated. They witnessed a scandal or a moral failing of a leader.

In other words, they left churches because those churches ceased to resemble Jesus in any meaningful way. And the thing that they found about these both groups of people, the de-churching people, that I think is most interesting is that many of these people, the vast majority of these people still believe in Jesus.

They still believe in Jesus. It's just at some point along the way, they stopped believing in the church. And this raises all kinds of questions about the relationship between Jesus and the church.

[2 : 18] People who say, I want to have a relationship with Jesus, but I think my relationship with the church is done. How should we think about that kind of thing? But if I can sit in my living room and pray and know that through Jesus Christ, I can have direct access to the God of the universe, why trouble myself to throw on my clothes, to wrestle my kids into their clothes, to maybe fight and argue and bicker and threaten consequences all the way to the front steps of the church, to walk in 15 or 20 minutes late trying to find a seat, wrestling my youngest?

Why go through that? What's the relationship between Jesus and his church? In the lectionary this week, we're looking at Matthew chapter 16, verses 13 to 20.

This is the first mention of the word church in the Gospels, which is interesting. And we're going to see what we can learn from this as it relates to the questions we're asking this morning.

This narrative breaks down into three parts. We're going to see a pivotal question, a foundational answer, and then an eternal promise. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word.

We thank you for your son. We thank you for your church. Lord, please bring all three together this morning. We are here, for whatever other reason we walk through this door, we are here to hear from you.

[3 : 44] We ask that through your written word, you would bring us face to face with the living word. He's the reason that we're here. We pray that this would happen by your grace, through the power of your Holy Spirit, for your glory.

Amen. So first of all, a pivotal question. Verse 13 says, Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, who do people say the Son of Man is?

This is interesting. He says, now when they got to Caesarea Philippi. Now, why would that trigger this question? Well, if you know anything about that area, it was a very pluralistic area. It was an area that was full of pagan temples to all kinds of various deities.

In the grotto under the mountain nearby was said to be the birthplace of the god Pan, who was the most famous fertility god in that ancient world, in that part of the world.

This was also said to be the mouth of the River Jordan. Also, there was a huge gleaming marble temple that had just been recently erected to honor the emperor because worship of the emperor was something that was happening as well.

[4 : 57] And so all of these different sort of rivers of various religions, this is a confluence of all of these various religions all coming together in this area.

And so at this kind of nexus of spiritual traditions and allegiances, Jesus says, who do people say that I am? So I don't think it's any coincidence that he picks this locale for this pivotal conversation. So, of course, Jesus knows what people are saying about him. He's not naive about that. So he's asking because he's wanting to engage his disciples in a conversation about his identity.

This whole section of Matthew is about confusion over Jesus' true identity. Earlier, the Pharisees have been saying to Jesus, prove yourself. If you're really a king, do something miraculous.

And so Jesus is inviting his disciples into a conversation. What he's wanting to do with them is to separate out all of the false assumptions from the truth.

[6 : 00] It's about disambiguation. He's wanting to separate out the truth from the fiction. So the disciples say, well, some say that you're one of the prophets. That's what a lot of people would say.

You're like Elijah or Jeremiah. You're one of the prophets of old. Many people today say something similar about Jesus. Jesus was a popular teacher. He was a prophet.

Even Jews and Muslims would recognize that. But nothing more. Then Jesus asks the real question. Okay, that's what they're saying. Now who do you say that I am?

Who do you say that I am? If our beliefs about Jesus are not formed in conversation with Jesus, they will be formed in other conversations.

They will be formed by the culture around us. If our beliefs about Jesus are not formed in conversation with him, they will be formed elsewhere. And there are many people, I think, who believe in Jesus, but their idea of Jesus, the Jesus they believe in, has been distorted by social or cultural or political influences.

[7 : 14] And this is why it's so bizarre. You can go from one church to the next. So and so Christian church, XYZ Christian church. And you walk in the door, and what you encounter, the version of Jesus on display can be radically different from one church to the next.

Just walking down the same road in D.C. Just walk down 16th, northwest, and just go into some of those churches and just ask them who Jesus is.

You're going to hear radically different answers. One church might represent Jesus as someone who is calling us as a nation to repent of our immorality and return to traditional family values.

They would talk about how all of the hardships that we're facing now as a country, that is God's judgment on us for leaving our Christian roots. And then you would go to another church, and they would talk about Jesus as a bastion of unconditional love and acceptance who affirms everyone in their life choices no matter what.

You'd have one church who believes Jesus established the United States as a Christian nation and that the U.S. Constitution is a divinely inspired document like the Bible.

[8 : 29] You know, a survey in 2021 found that one in five Americans believes that. One in five Americans believes that the U.S. Constitution was divinely inspired. And then another church would teach that Jesus passionately opposed capitalism.

He's a passionate anti-capitalist. And he calls his followers to a life of socialism and voluntary poverty. And so you ping-pong between one church to the next to the next, and you're asking, who do people say that Jesus is?

There's so many different answers. So what's the point that I'm driving at here is now the part where I say, and we here at Church of the Advent have it all figured out, here's who Jesus is.

I'm not going to say that. I hope we're on the right track. The point is this. Here's the point. And it's for all of us. We have to continually seek to understand Jesus by being in continual conversation with him through the Scriptures.

Because if we don't, we open ourselves up to all kinds of distortions. So our desire to know the true Jesus, the Jesus who has revealed himself through the Scriptures, that has to be an ongoing conversation of refining and refining and refining, of separating out our assumptions and separating out the gossip and the rumor from the fact.

[9 : 56] Jesus, the real three-dimensional Jesus that we see in Scripture, defies categorization. Defies categorization.

Earlier in Matthew's Gospel, we see him doing things like this. We see him saying that our righteousness should exceed that of the Pharisees. We see him saying that if we even look lustfully at someone, we've committed adultery.

We see him saying that if you harbor anger against someone, that it is as though you have murdered that person. And so you look at those places, and then you begin to draw some conclusions. Well, clearly Jesus came to reform us morally.

He's a moral reformer. He's calling us to this standard of righteousness. But then you look at other passages in Matthew, and you see him protecting a woman who's called an adultery.

Protecting a woman called adultery. You see him partying with notorious sinners and reprobates, eating and drinking late into the night with them. And then you start to say, well, maybe Jesus is more of a, you know, about tolerance and inclusion and acceptance.

[11 : 06] Because, look, he seems to love everybody and welcome them as they are. And maybe Jesus is really about inclusion and affirmation. And as soon as you start to say that, then you see him saying, hey, no one can come to the Father except through me.

Or, I didn't come to bring peace in the world. But a sword and families are going to be divided against each other because of me.

And every time you think you've got it, if you're in that conversation, you come across something that challenges, expands, refines that sense of who Jesus is.

So for those of us here who are Christians, who do you say that Jesus is? Do we take all of Scripture into account or do we pick out the parts that we like and ignore the rest?

There should always be tension between Jesus and our politics and personal preferences. If there are not points of tension between who Jesus is and what he represents and the way that we would prefer things to operate, then chances are you're not in that conversation.

[12 : 16] You're not in an ongoing conversation. And then for those of us who are not Christians, same question. Who do you say that Jesus is? Most people agree that Jesus was, most scholars agree now.

It used to try to be argued that Jesus didn't exist. And now there's more or less a consensus that Jesus did exist. And so we have to figure out who was Jesus. Right?

Even if you don't believe that he still exists, you've got to figure out something, some kind of explanation. You know, before I came to faith, I had rejected Christianity and I thought I knew what Christianity was all about.

And it wasn't really until a kind of gutsy friend challenged me and he said, have you ever actually read the Scriptures and tried to understand who Jesus really was? And I said no.

I hadn't. And that was kind of what put me on the road to coming to faith. And so the question would be this. Have you ever actually read the Gospel? If you're not a Christian, have you ever actually read the Gospel accounts? Have you entered into conversation with Jesus?

[13 : 13] Have you asked God to reveal to you who Jesus really is? Or are you just making a bunch of assumptions based on what the culture says about Jesus?

So this is the most pivotal question in our lives. Who do you believe Jesus really is? That's the pivotal question. Now look at Peter's answer.

Here's Peter's answer. He says, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God. Christ is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word Messiah, which basically means the anointed one.

And the Messiah was the one who God promised to send who would one day fulfill all of God's promises for Israel and the world.

This anointed one would one day come. And traditionally, in Jewish tradition, three kinds of people were anointed. Prophets, priests, and kings.

[14 : 17] So to call Jesus the Christ, the ultimate anointed one, is to say that he is the ultimate prophet, priest, and king.

So the job of a prophet is to speak God's word faithfully. But what we see in Jesus is the ultimate prophet because he doesn't just speak God's word.

He is God's word made flesh, as the apostle John says in chapter one of his gospel. The job of a priest is to mediate the relationship between God and his people.

To offer sacrifices to atone for their sin. But as the author of Hebrews writes, Jesus is the great high priest. He doesn't just offer sacrifices.

He offers himself as the one true sacrifice to atone for all the sin of the world. The job of a king is to exercise God's rule over all creation.

[15:17] Well, the apostle Paul, in his letter to Timothy, calls Jesus the king of kings. The Lord of lords. So Jesus is king over all of the kings.

Psalms 2 talks about this God's great king coming and all the kings and rulers of the earth bowing down and kissing the ring of this one true king.

He's the king of kings. I once heard a pastor say that having Jesus as king means we have to fire the committee. We have to fire the committee.

We are not the kind of integrated, unified, whole people that we like to believe that we are. We are hopelessly divided on the inside. We, inside our hearts, operate more like a committee sitting around a boardroom table.

Right? So we have the, you have your work self. You have your social self. Maybe your sort of Christian social self and your non-Christian social self. We have our political self, our sexual self, our foodie self, our sort of religious self.

[16:25] We have all of these sort of selves and they're all sitting around the table and they're continually arguing and debating constantly. My foodie self will say, I want a bacon cheeseburger for breakfast.

And then my, my, my dad self will say, but don't you want to live to see your kids graduate? And then my, you know, and then my, my marriage self will look over and look at the look that my wife is giving me as I suggest that for breakfast.

And then my work self says, I don't want to have a food coma by 10 o'clock in the morning. And all of my selves are arguing about this decision. And we're divided. We are constantly divided. And so when we accept Christ to use that language, it can be very tempting to just give Jesus a spot on that committee.

Now that you're here, Jesus, we have a chair for you. Come join us at the boardroom table. And Jesus gets a voice and Jesus gets a vote. And Jesus gets one vote.

And sometimes Jesus might prevail. And other times Jesus might get outvoted. The only way to accept Christ as king is to fire the committee.

[17:44] Because Jesus didn't come to sit on a committee. That's not what kings do. Jesus came to rule over us. To rule over every aspect of our lives.

And so the only way to accept Christ is to say to Jesus, listen, I've tried life by committee. And it doesn't work. I want you to have the only vote.

I want there to be one vote. And you get it. I want you to have the final word over every aspect of my life. Whether I like it or not. I want you to be in control.

I want you to take over. That's what it means to acknowledge Jesus as the Christ and the king of our lives. Some of us, I think, here may want to attend church.

I mean, we're here. So obviously, at least for today, that's true. But maybe we resist the idea of joining a church. Becoming members of a church.

[18:47] Being confirmed in a church. We resist having to agree on and sign a statement of faith. Probably because of social or cultural issues.

And listen, on one level, I get it. I get it. But I also want to push you on that. I want to suggest that with all due respect, your issue is not with the church.

It's actually with Jesus. There could be this deep down resistance to Jesus having the final word over every aspect of our lives.

We're happy to have him on the committee, but really uncomfortable with him as king. Because then we have to agree to and affirm that he said and taught and represented things that make us deeply uncomfortable.

It's much easier to keep the debate going on around that boardroom table. It's much easier to be kind of perpetually undecided. Because as long as the debate is ongoing, we don't really have to

commit to anything.

[19 : 51] It doesn't really cost us anything. But Jesus didn't come to sit on the committee. He came to be king.

So this is the foundational answer that Peter gives. He says what Jesus has been waiting to hear. Now for the first time, it's as though Jesus has been waiting and waiting and waiting and waiting for one of the disciples to finally get it.

And you can sort of see him, you know, well, who do you say that I am? And Peter says you're the Christ, the son of God. And you can see him sort of lighting up. Yes. You got it finally.

And so for the first time, he reveals his plan to establish the church, this eternal promise. He says, blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my father who is in heaven.

And I tell you, you are Peter. And on this rock, I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. A lot of people, it's one of their favorite verses. A lot of ink has been spilled over the language of the rock.

[21 : 05] We don't have time to get into a full comprehensive discussion of that here this morning. Let me just address it briefly so that we can move on in this text. Some of you are Catholic or you grew up Catholic and you know that Catholics will look to this verse as proof that Peter was established as the first bishop of Rome.

And he was vested with this authority and that that authority then passed on to subsequent popes throughout the centuries on down to today. So whoever is sitting as the current pope is Peter's successor and represents the same authority.

Protestants have historically pushed back and said, no, he doesn't have Peter in mind at all. He's talking about Peter's faith. It's the faith that is the rock on which the church is built.

Again, we don't have time to get into a thorough discussion of this. I do think that Protestants have overcorrected here. Clearly, I think if you look at the text, Jesus has Peter in mind.

There's a wordplay that is happening here in renaming Simon as Peter, Petros. Petros and saying he's the rock on which the church is built. So the word Petros, rock, right?

[22 : 16] You can't say it has nothing to do with Peter. It definitely has to do with Peter. But at the same time, there's nothing in this passage that would indicate that this would transfer to Peter's successors or establish the papacy as we know it today.

In fact, if you look at the history of the interpretation of Matthew 16, 18, what you see is that that interpretation doesn't show up until centuries after this was written. And even there, only by a few of the church fathers, there was a lot of disagreement over the early church fathers, Augustine or Origen, St. John Chrysostom, as to how to apply it.

Some thought it meant the rock is Jesus and some thought it was the faith. There was a whole Eastern tradition, right, that talks about the faith being the rock. And so there's all of these different interpretations.

You really don't see this showing up as a solid Roman Catholic argument for the papacy until the Middle Ages and into the Reformation when it's being used to justify something that's under attack. And so what I would say this, this is just Tommy speaking my own thoughts on this. I think that this is referring to Peter, but Peter in his confessional capacity.

[23 : 29] Peter in his confessional capacity. In the very next passage, Peter loses sight of Jesus as the Christ. He tries to convince Jesus not to go to the cross. And what does Jesus call him?

He doesn't say, oh, come on, rock. You know, you know, buck up. No, he calls him Satan. Right? So it's easy for Peter to step out of his rockness, to go back to his Simon-ness, and even to represent Satan's intentions.

But when Peter is in his confessional capacity, established on the truth that Jesus is the Christ, he's the rock.

And we see Peter play a key rock-like role in the establishing of the church through his confession of the faith.

You see that throughout the entire first half of the book of Acts. At Pentecost, he preaches a sermon that is essentially an extended version of this conversation with Jesus. It's almost as though he remembered this conversation, and then he turned it into a sermon, and through the power of the Holy Spirit, preaches this to thousands of Jews.

[24 : 40] It's the first time they've ever heard the gospel announced. And his sermon essentially says this. Jesus is not just one of the prophets. In verse 36, let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.

That's the climax of his sermon. He confesses his faith. He's the rock. And what happens? 3,000 people come to faith, and the church is born. Peter is fulfilling what Jesus says here in Matthew. He's the rock on which Jesus begins to build his church through his confession of faith. Right now, what can we learn about the church here?

I would say we can draw out three things that we learn about the church. This brings us back to some of the questions that we're asking at the very beginning. Jesus, number one, Jesus builds his church through faith.

He builds his church through faith. Jesus is the one who builds the church, not us. And the church is not just a social club.

[25 : 50] It's not just a service provider. The church is a community of people who believe and follow Jesus as the Christ, as the true prophet, priest, and king.

And this is why, by the way, right after this sermon, we're going to be confessing our faith using the Nicene Creed. And people often ask, well, even though the creed talks about the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, why is there so much attention devoted to Jesus and all that Jesus did? Well, this is the reason. It's because the beliefs that we hold about Jesus are really the thing that determine whether or not we are, in fact, Christians.

And so the creeds have been used throughout the centuries. The Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed. They've been used to delineate the boundaries between people who believe in and follow the true Jesus and people who have some other erroneous idea of who Jesus is.

And the faith to confess Jesus as the Messiah faithfully, we have to recognize that's a gift from God. Jesus says, flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

[27 : 02] No one can be intellectually reasoned into the faith. It's not just sitting down with somebody with the creed and the Bible and saying, you have to believe these things. No, we have to be brought into this through the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

So if there's somebody in your life who you're burdened for them because they just seem closed off, you know, it's come up and they just, they're hardened to the church. They're hardened to Christians.

They would never set foot. It's easy to think and invest our time in what are the right arguments? How can I get the right apologetics that will really get through to this person? And listen, there's a place for that.

But I hope that you're spending at least as much time praying for that person. Praying that the Holy Spirit would do what Jesus himself says no human being can do. God has to open hearts.

So number one, Jesus builds his church through faith. Number two, Jesus promises that the church will last forever. He talks about the gates of hell.

[28 : 02] That's a Jewish phrase that means the realm of death. What he's essentially saying is this, the church is going to last into eternity. Governments are going to come and go.

Administrations are going to come and go. Nations are going to rise and fall. The church, the communion of people who confess Jesus as Messiah and Lord will last into eternity.

It will last. It's the only institution that will last into eternity. So you read books like *The Great Dechurching*. I think it's an extremely helpful book. And I think it's extremely helpful for understanding this particular moment in history.

But it's easy to become kind of chicken little-ish as we look at these numbers and to run around panicking. And is this it? Is this the end? Is the church going to collapse? Absolutely not. History is filled with times of growth, times of decline.

We had the Great Awakenings in our country, a huge increase in the number of Christians. And now it's in decline. Right? It goes up. It goes down. It goes up.

[29 : 06] It goes down. You know where the church is really growing massively right now? Not here. In the global south. That's where it's growing. Just because it's not happening in our country doesn't mean it's not happening.

It means maybe, in fact, we need to be in decline for a while as a church to remember who we really are and why we're really here. If God uses suffering to break through to us on an individual

level and loss to get through to us on an individual level, why not on a corporate level? Right? So Jesus promises the church will last forever. And number three, and this is the one that can make us squirm a little bit, Jesus entrusts the church with his authority. He entrusts the church with his authority.

Here's where we really see the mystery of the church on display. Jesus calls Peter, and then later in chapter 18, he actually restates this to all of the disciples.

It's not just Peter. To act as stewards over the church. The steward holds the keys to the church. When the Pharisees and the scribes, when they were holding the keys to God's people, they slammed the door in people's faces.

[30 : 24] And Jesus says, I'm giving you the keys now, and I want you to fling them wide open. I want you to preach the gospel everywhere you go. And he gives them authority.

He delegates his authority to them. He uses this language of binding and loosing. That's a technical reference to what the rabbis would do. When the rabbis would say that certain things are permitted and certain things are not permitted.

When they would affirm that certain teachings were the correct interpretation of scripture. They were exercising this sort of legislative authority. They were binding and loosing. Permitting, allowing in, excommunicating.

They were overseeing the affairs of the church. And so what we see here is something that we really have to wrestle with. Jesus is not just establishing the church as this kind of otherworldly spiritual communion.

He's actually establishing it as an institution. He's institutionalizing the church. He's creating an administrative leadership capacity. Where people lead and oversee the affairs of the church.

[31 : 26] In his name. You know, this language actually is referenced and shows up in the ordination liturgy.

Not just in our church, but in a lot of churches. So what we see here is the beginning of something really profound. And that is this. The church is the physical presence of Christ on earth.

The church is the hands and feet of Christ on earth. The church is the means through which Jesus continues his ministry on earth. We often like to point out that in Luke's gospel, he says, Oh, Theophilus, I'm going to tell you, I'm going to begin to tell you, or I'm going to tell you all that Jesus began to do and to say.

And then when you get to the book of Acts, which is Luke chapter 2, he says, I'm going to tell you what Jesus continued to do and to say. But then the entire book of Acts is about the church. So what we see here is the church is the continuation of the ministry of Jesus on earth.

So those of us in the church need to take this very seriously. Whenever our churches fail to reflect the heart of Christ, whether it's by compromising in our commitment to his word, or in compromising the call to love, to seek justice, to care for the poor, to bind up the brokenhearted, then we are failing in our call to be Christ in the world.

[32 : 59] And we need to repent. And maybe that's part of what is happening right now in our country. Those outside of the church, though, should also take this seriously.

Jesus and his church are one. They are bride and groom. When we come together as we have this morning, Christ is uniquely present here in a way that he is not anywhere else.

He is in our midst. He ministers to us in a unique way. I know the truths that we sing and that we sang this morning, but I need to hear Annika singing to me.

I know what we confess in the creed is true, but I need to hear Deborah and Brock and Lisa, people sitting around me, I need to hear them saying it.

It affirms that it's true for me. There's a sense in which when we come here, we cease to be just ourselves as individuals. We merge together. We come together.

[34 : 01] We become one. And in this merging and communing, Christ is ministering to us. When we come to this table, Christ is ministering to us through bread and wine, the most common basic elements of life.

When we pray for one another, Christ is ministering to us in ways that are unique to being here together. We need to be together.

This is the presence of Christ on earth. When we are here, when we are in the church, we are in him. So we cannot understand the church apart from Jesus, but we cannot understand Jesus apart from the church.

Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for the mystery here. May we not press into it and so somehow lose sight of it.

May we behold it, and may it provoke us to awe and wonder and worship. Lord, there are those here who may have been deeply hurt, wounded, mistreated by people in the church, by leaders in the church.

[35 : 11] I pray that you would minister to them, that you would bring healing, that you would bring those in need of repentance to repentance. Lord, I pray for those who are, have become maybe too complacent.

Lord, I pray that you would stir us up. I pray that you would convict us and challenge us to reprioritize. In all ways, Lord, I pray that you would continue calling us together as your body, your hands and feet, your bride, for your glory.

In your son's name, amen.