

The Church's Builder

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[0 : 00] Good morning, everyone. We're back in Matthew's Gospel for the fall term. You even may remember this passage as the last one in our last Matthew sermon series.

So our passage this morning contains the first reference to the church in the New Testament, and actually one of only two references in all the Gospels to the church, the ecclesia, the gathering of God.

Both these references are, as a matter of fact, are in Matthew's Gospel. And that's because in Matthew, uniquely, in chapters 16 to 20, Jesus is teaching about the church, teaching to the church. And there are two great temptations, at least, when we talk about building the church. The first I'll call individualism. It tends to be more common among evangelical Protestants, and the temptation is to think that the church needs dynamic individuals, bold, charismatic, entrepreneurial leaders who can market and sell spiritual experiences as if the church were a Silicon Valley startup.

That's individualism. But the second temptation is institutionalism. And it tends to be more common among Roman Catholics, Orthodox, and perhaps many Anglicans.

[1 : 37] The temptation here is to think that the church is built and maintained by its offices, by its structures and its traditions, as if it were an ancient family guarding a hereditary line.

Well, these words of Christ this morning, they are Jesus' great corrective to both individualists and institutionalists.

And it's summed up by a very powerful statement in verse 18. If you have a look at verse 18 with me. I want this sentence to be ringing in your ears for this whole fall term.

Jesus says, I will build my church. That's his promise. I will build my church. The church belongs to Jesus Christ.

He formed it. He died for it. He is the one building it. Not individuals, not institutions, but Jesus Christ. And despite all the messiness, all the sinfulness, Jesus loves the church.

[2 : 47] And so he promises here, I will build my church. It belongs to him. And I'd like us to focus in on verses 15 to 18 to take a closer look at this church that Jesus builds.

I have two simple headings for us. The church's confession and the church's foundation. The church's confession and its foundation.

So let's start in verses 15 to 17 with the church's confession. Jesus said to them, Who do you say that I am?

And Simon Peter replied, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered him, Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

Jesus deliberately brings his disciples to the northernmost territories of Israel, to the Herodian city of Caesarea Philippi.

[3 : 48] It's on a very important east, west, and north, south trading route. The city was also a long-time site of a famous temple to the Greek god Pan.

Dan Gifford and I visited the site of that cave where that temple was last year. Jesus seems to have deliberately set them up in this multicultural, multi-religious, religiously diverse setting.

And then he asks his friends this key question, Who do you think I am? Who do you think I am? And Peter says, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

And this is the church's confession. Jesus of Nazareth is the Messiah, the Son of the one true and living God. Well, well done, Peter, we might say.

Or well done, Jesus, for teaching Peter so well so that he recognized this wonderful truth. But then Jesus says a most unusual thing, For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

[4 : 56] And so in one quick moment, he shifts our attention, our gaze away from Peter and towards God the Father. So that this is the first lesson for the church that Jesus is building.

Faith in Christ, confession of Christ, is a gift from God the Father. It's a gift. Our Father not only sends his Son as a gift, He also sends faith in his Son as a gift.

Both Jesus and faith in Jesus are sheer gift, in other words. And our temptation to individualism, to counting on charismatic visionaries to build the church, isn't that really just a doubting in the power and the sufficiency of this promise?

to think that it can't be a gift, that it can't be something that God is doing, but it has to be something that we do, that we have the cleverness or the vision to enact.

But wherever the gospel is shared, humbly or gently, even with a stutter or imperfectly, wherever that happens, the whole power of heaven lies behind it, waiting to regenerate the sinner's heart with the Father's gift of faith in Christ.

[6 : 31] That's what Jesus wants you to know. The church's confession has the power of heaven behind it. And it's all a gift.

And then secondly, the church's foundation in verse 18. 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.

You may know that Peter's a nickname. One commentator said that his nickname was Rocky. It means rock, Peter, Petrus.

So Jesus is making a pun here. He says, you are Petrus, and on this Petra I will build my church.

And the tricky question though is, for at least 500 years we've been debating this, what does Jesus mean by this rock?

Is this rock Peter himself? And that's the basis upon which Roman Catholics teach that Peter was the first pope. The basis of all the authoritative apostolic succession that comes after Peter is on the basis of this verse.

[7 : 40] Or rather, is this rock a reference to Peter's confession of Peter's faith? In which case, Peter is a representative who represents all those who proclaim the gospel on which Jesus will build his church.

Well, let's step back for a moment and consider that our interpretation, whatever it is, it needs to be faithful to the context here in Matthew 16, of course, and also to the wider context, the relevance from the rest of Scripture.

Which leads me to think that Jesus' pun here, it seems to imply that he is singling out Peter for some sort of special part in Jesus' plan to build his church.

So that we can't, whatever our interpretation, we can't simply see Peter as a representative for some sort of generic faith. He is definitely speaking to Peter here. However, there's just no, there's no real New Testament scriptural warrant for raising Peter up, therefore, as the first pope.

He's just not treated that way by the other apostles. We'll see in chapter 18 that John and his brother James come to Jesus asking to be at his right and his left hand.

[8 : 58] Well, one commentator says, why would they do that if they already know that Peter is the boss? At best, he's first among equals.

Well, I've found the most helpful thing in understanding this verse is to actually step back and consider Peter's role in the early church in the book of Acts. I think that has a great deal to teach us about how this verse is to be understood.

So consider this. It is Peter who preaches the Pentecost sermon in Acts 2 which proclaims Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, to the Jews in Jerusalem so that 3,000 are baptized that day.

And it's Peter with John who preaches the gospel to the Samaritans in Acts 8 so that they also receive the Holy Spirit. And it is Peter who first proclaims the good news to Cornelius the Gentile in Acts 10 so that the gospel, it crosses this dramatic chasm between Jew and Gentile for the first time so that it can begin its journey to the ends of the earth.

Peter is indeed in some sense the rock on which Jesus builds his early church. But not Peter the individual as if his dynamism and his charisma won those early converts.

[10 : 17] And neither is it Peter the institution as if his apostolic authority brought new life to men and women. It was Simon Peter the humble servant preaching the truth of Jesus' Messiahship and divinity through which God used him for the building of Christ's church.

This is the second lesson for the church that Jesus is building. The church's foundation is none other than the preaching of the apostolic faith once delivered.

And this is the rock on which Jesus builds. This is the rock that he promises the gates of Hades, the power of death, can never overcome.

How do we really get things done in this world?

Doesn't it take truly great individuals or truly powerful institutions to make any sort of significant progress or change in the world? I mean, what hope does the church have apart from those kind of methods?

[11 : 33] But Jesus says, I will build my church. Not by flashy leaders or intimidating institutions, but by each new gift of faith my Heavenly Father gives to a young woman or a young man who confesses Jesus as Lord and Savior.

Neither will it be by viral videos or political rallies, but by the humble, plain speech of one believer sharing the good news with another and then living it out in visible ways.

That is Jesus' reminder to us as we begin this series looking at the church that Jesus builds. May it ever be so.

Amen.