

Introduction

I saw a docu-drama this week about the “Free Burma Rangers.” Former U.S. Army Special Forces officer, David Eubank started the group about 25 years ago. The country of Burma was being ravaged by the horrors of a civil war. The Free Burma Rangers go into the midst of the turmoil and threat of death to rescue displaced and injured civilians. They put their lives on the line in the name of Jesus to bring people to safety. The work of the Free Burma Rangers is not unlike the Great Commission work given by Jesus to his church. We are called to go on the offensive, to enter hostile territory to proclaim the gospel to rescue souls. It is a task to which we have been called but for which we have also been assured by Christ himself. He does so in our text this morning. It is a text which could not be more suited to the mission emphasis we are observing this weekend.

[Read Scripture (Matt 16:13-20) and Pray]

Peter, in opposition to conventional wisdom, boldly and unequivocally confessed that Jesus is the Messiah, the anointed one, the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Jesus explained that Peter experienced God’s grace. He was able to make this confession only because God opened his eyes. Jesus then turned to connect this work of grace to the work he came to complete. As we focus on verses 18-20 this morning, we observe that the church of the Lord Jesus Christ takes center-stage. Four features of his church stand out . . .

I. The Church’s Construction.

There are three aspects here of the church’s construction.

A. First, it is progressive. Jesus uses the term build. I will BUILD my church. Building is a process. It is accomplished over time. The church is Jesus’s construction project, and it is ongoing even today. The Church is being built by Jesus. Stone upon stone, life upon life, steady progress is made. And Christ calls his disciples to join him in building his church. That is what we do as we proclaim the gospel and make disciples.

B. Jesus draws particular attention to a second aspect of construction—the foundation upon which he will build. “On this rock I will build my church.” Unfortunately, this statement is wrought with misinterpretation. Here is what you need to know. Peter is not the rock upon which Jesus will build. Before us is an instance where knowing a little Greek helps. Jesus uses two similar but distinctly different Greek words for rock. One is Peter’s name, Petros, which refers to a “little rock.” The other word for rock is the foundation upon which Jesus will build. It is petra, which refers to a “big rock.” So basically, Jesus is saying, Peter, you are little rock and on this big rock I will build my church. Peter is a little rock, but what “little rock” has just confessed is the “big rock” upon which Christ will build his church. That confession was that Jesus is the Messiah. It is a confession which he was only able to make because of God’s enlightening grace.

No one will be built into the church who has not come to Jesus as the Messiah, the Christ, the only Savior and great King. Peter is not the foundation but one of many little rocks Jesus makes part of the building. The word CHURCH means assembly. Jesus is assembling together living stones uses to build his church. That’s what Peter tells us in his first epistle. He says of believers in 1 Peter 2:5, “you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house.”

We come then to the third aspect of the church’s construction. The construction of Jesus is DETERMINED construction. I WILL build my church. These are reassuring words. All around the disciples saw resistance to Christ. These who remained with him were few. Can it be that this is a movement that will fail? Will it die away? No, says the king of kings, my church will be built. It will grow it will expand as I add more living stones, one by one by one.

Next, I want you to see . . .

II. The Church’s Dominance.

Jesus declares that the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. Hades is the actual word used here, not hell. But there is some lack of clarity over what it actually refers to. What is clear is there is an evil enemy of the church that would oppose the church and threaten to put the construction

to a stop. But Jesus says this enemy will fail. The church will not be held in check by it. In fact the church will dominate.

The use of the figure of gates is very telling here. The GATES of hades will not prevail. Gates are passive. The purpose of gates is to restrict entrance or to restrict exit. You close the gates of a prison to keep the prisoners in and to keep out those who might break in to set the captives free. Listen, every stone that is part of the church Jesus is building was once a captive in the prison of death, the domain of darkness.

The gates of hades represent an attempt by the enemy to keep the church out, to push the church back from plundering the domain of darkness. And that is precisely what Isaiah said the Messiah would do. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to . . . proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening up of the prison to those who are bound." (Is 61)

Jesus is implying that the church he is building is not going to be passive. This is not a building that will just sit there. It is an assembly of people who will make an assault on the dominion of darkness. And Jesus promises that the powers of death and darkness are not going to be up to the challenge. Jesus came to enter the house of a strong man and plunder his goods. He came to deliver sinners from the domain of darkness and transfer them to his kingdom. How does he do it? First by living and dying as the lamb of God and rising from the dead, and then by sending his church into the darkness to preach the gospel, make disciples, and rescue souls.

Let's turn next to

III. The Church's Authority.

Here is the reason the church will prevail. In verse 19 Jesus declares that he will give the church the keys of the kingdom. The one who holds the keys possesses the king's authority. He uses the keys to bind and loosen. The church goes into the domain of darkness preaching the gospel not by its own authority but by the authority of the Messiah. It is not their mission but his.

As the church goes into the domain of death with the gospel message that Jesus is the Messiah, some will believe. They will be rescued; they will be

loosed in heaven and on earth. As others in the bonds of sin refuse to recognize Jesus as Messiah, they will be bound in their refusal.

Finally, we take note of . . .

IV. The Church's Excitement.

The thrill of this moment with Jesus clearly had primed the disciples to run out and tell everybody right away what they had learned. The cat is officially out of the bag. Jesus himself is clearly owning himself as Messiah. And he will be victorious. The assembly he is putting together will be unstoppable; they will be clothed with his authority; and nothing can stand in their way! Come and believe!! Come and own Jesus as your Messiah!! But Jesus said, "No." Not yet. Telling everyone that Jesus was the Christy is exactly what they wanted to do at that moment, yet Jesus STRICTLY charged them to tell no one. It was not yet time.

The time would come . . . after Jesus's death and resurrection. At that time no boundaries should keep anyone from telling the glad news that Jesus is the Christ. The time to tell was then and it is now.

Conclusion

What Jesus was doing here in Matthew 16 was planting the seeds of anticipation and preparation in his disciples for the day in which he would call them together and commission them with these words: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and [assault the gates of hades] make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

A particular image from the docu-drama about the Free Burma Rangers won't leave my mind. The rangers took their mission to Iraq. They came upon a pile of dead bodies in Mosul. Isis snipers were firing away. Yet among the dead was a little girl. Somehow shielded from the sniper fire, she sat there frozen in place, partially covering herself with her dead mother's head scarf. American planes dropped smoke from the sky and the Iraqis allowed use of one of their tanks. The team came in and

maneuvered behind the tank. Dave Eubanks ducked under gunfire and ran over to the girl and took hold of her to bring her to safety.

This image depicts the work Christ's church is called to do. We trust not in gunfire nor human strength. Our trust is in Messiah who said, I will build my church and the gates of hades will not prevail against it. The world is a domain of death and darkness and danger. The stakes of the gospel could not be higher. Souls are held captive in the clutches of an evil enemy. But Christ will build his church. He has authorized his disciples to assault the gates and proclaim that he is Messiah so that in him captives may be set free. That means me and you. This what is at stake every day.

Prayer

Two of our fellow soldiers of the cross are with us today to share how Christ is at work through them to pummel the gates of hades.