

Sermons on Matthew

I Will Build My Church

Matthew 16:18-20

Part 1

The Foundation

With Study Questions

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**And I also say to you that __you are Peter, and __on this rock I will build My church, and _the gates of Hades shall not __prevail against it. ⁻¹⁹⁻
_And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth __will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven._" ⁻²⁰⁻ __Then He commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ (Matthew 16:18-20).**

Introduction—The Expendable Church

It is quite trendy to be spiritual. And spirituality is much more popular when it cuts all cords with the church. The saying, "I'm not into organized religion," could be made into a modern pagan hymn. The church, being aware of man's natural contempt for her, often caters to this derision with proclamations of her own expendability.

Gospel presentations (and I don't question motives here) in an effort to set Christ apart as man's only true spiritual food (and who can disagree with that?) will offer a list of things which are unnecessary. The evangelist encourages the sinner to come to Christ just as he is. Money, intellect, an acceptable level of righteousness, sufficient penance, etc. are all viewed (and rightfully so) as impediments to the sinner who is called to come to Christ alone and have his sins washed away, not by works but by faith.

But it becomes a very dangerous game when the evangelist adds the church to the list of items which are dispensable. It's like a doctor telling a patient, "All you need is the medicine," then leaving the room. To which the patient would respond, "What medicine?"

It would appear that God has made the church, in a certain sense, necessary. Of course we all agree that God Himself is in need of nothing and of no man. Jesus informs us that if we were to remain silent, the stones would "cry out" (Luke 19:40). But Christians should make every effort to keep the stones silent. God has called the church to cry out. It is the means by which God has determined to reveal Himself and redeem mankind.

By "church," we are speaking of those visible entities which received letters from apostles; "to the church at Thessalonica, Galatia, etc." which make up the majority of books in the New Testament. We are not speaking of that invisible church made up of true believers of all history throughout

the entire world yet known but to God¹. We are speaking of the *ekklesia* (*ek* = out of, and *klesis* = a calling, or the 'called out ones') who gather in specific bodies throughout the world to hear from and worship Christ; bodies, by the way, made up of those who are saved and some who may not be saved.

It is in the light of this current mentality toward the church—that it is expendable—that we pursue understanding the passage before us. We will seek to answer four questions over the next few weeks: What is the foundation of the church? What are the expectations of the church? What is the role of the church? What is the authority of the church?

This morning we will seek to answer, “What is the foundation of the church?”

What is the Foundation of the Church?

And I also say to you that __you are Peter, and __on this rock I will build My church. . . (Matthew 16:18a)

The Church's One Foundation?

Assuming we agree with the simple part of this passage, Christ is the one building His church. The question this verse evokes is, 'what is the foundation on which Christ builds His church?' What is the rock which Jesus speaks of here? Is the hymn entirely correct: “The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord”? Or is there more to it than that?

This highly controversial passage has generated numerous suggestions as to what, or who, the foundation of the church actually is. Briefly, it has been put forward that 1) the foundation of the church is Peter as the first pope; 2) the foundation of the church are the words just uttered by Peter in the previous passage **“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:16)**; 3) that the foundation of the church are the apostles; and 4) that the foundation of the church is Jesus Himself—some suggest that when Jesus said “on this rock” He might have been pointing to Himself.

What Rock?

¹ Ekklesia is seldom used in the Bible in that sense.

It might seem obvious that Jesus is the foundation of the church. The apostle Paul makes it clear:

For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, __which is Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 3:11).

But we can't ignore the fact that Jesus tells Peter that He will build His church on something He calls "**this rock.**" Of what rock does Jesus speak? "This rock" can easily be seen as a play on words since Peter is *petros* in the Greek and rock is *petra* in the Greek. And even though *petros* is masculine and *petra* feminine, one can hardly ignore Jesus' use of the similar words since it was Jesus who gave Simon the name Peter in the first place (John 1:42). Add that to the fact that in the dialect spoken by Jesus (Aramaic or Syro-Chaldaic), "Peter" and "Rock" are the same words, makes it a bit harder to dismiss Jesus' connection of Peter to the foundation of the church.

Was Peter a Pope?

But does this argue in favor of Peter being the first pope? Not at all! For one, Jesus does not here, nor does He ever speak of Peter having successors extending through history. Secondly, as we shall soon see, the Scriptures reveal something other than a single apostle being this foundation. And though the testimony given by Peter (that Jesus was the Christ) served as an impetus for Jesus to give this instruction, the dialogue, in terms of the foundation of the church, grows much wider than a solitary sinful man.

Laying and Being a Foundation

So what's the answer? I think the answer can be found with a more thorough look at the 1 Corinthians passage above which speaks of laying and being a foundation. Paul writes,

According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I have laid __the foundation, and another builds on it. But let each one take heed how he builds on it.

⁻¹¹⁻ For no other foundation can anyone lay than __that which is laid, __which is Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 3:10, 11).

Here we see that Paul lays the foundation but the foundation itself is Christ. So who is actually laying the foundation? The foundation is Christ but it is laid, at least here, by the Apostle Paul. Let's look at another reference connecting the foundation with the apostles.

Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, ⁻²⁰⁻ having been __built __on the foundation of the __apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being __the chief cornerstone, ⁻²¹⁻ in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into _a holy temple in the Lord, ⁻²²⁻ __in whom you also are being built together for a __dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:19-22).

The household of God (the church) is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets. Did the apostles die to save us from our sins? Certainly not! What did they do? They informed us of the Savior who died for our sins.

So in this illustration Jesus is the cornerstone (the one true and only Savior), the apostles and prophets are the ones informing us of what Jesus did, and we are the temple which Jesus is constructing.

In Summary—Peter Speaking as a Representative Apostle

In summary it would appear that Jesus is telling Peter that He will build His church upon the *proclamation* of His (Jesus') works given by His apostles. But does that jibe with the discussion before us? I think it does. Especially when we consider that in the previous discussion Jesus addresses the apostles as a group followed by Peter responding as an individual. It's not quite as easy to detect in the English since 'you' in English is the same for singular and plural...unless you're from the south and you say 'y'all'.

In which case the conversation looks like this:

**He said to them, “_But who do _(y'all) say that I am?_” ⁻¹⁶⁻
Simon Peter answered and said, “_You are the Christ, the
Son of the living God”- (Matthew 16:15, 16).**

Peter had just spoken as the representative apostle. So it would not be inconsistent with the tenor of the text to recognize that when Jesus refers to Peter, He is including those other apostles who would deliver the foundational message of the gospel which we all have in our laps, i.e. the Scriptures.

Jesus and His Word

This makes sense of passages like Revelation 21:14 where we read,-

Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and _on them were the __names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb (Revelation 21:14).

Since Jesus equates Himself with His words which will never pass away (Matthew 24:35), it should not surprise us that those to whom Jesus gave the ability to infallibly pass on that word (though they received by grace, being granted by their Father in heaven) are given what we might consider to be almost an uncomfortably high seat of reverence. But it is not them we are to revere as much as we are to revere the message they convey.

Church or Word?

But we are speaking here of the foundation being the word of God. Where does the church fit into this? In brief, it is through the word of God, the gospel, that Jesus is building His church. And the church is the venue where the word goes forth.

In the Old Testament God committed word(s) to the nation of Israel which was His Old Covenant church. Paul writes that to the Jews

. . .were committed the oracles (*logia*—words or sayings) of God (Romans 3:2b).

In the same way, the New Testament writings are given to, and proclaimed through, the churches. Paul did not send his letters to the local publishers, newspapers or para-church organizations. The letters were sent to churches who were to faithfully proclaim the foundational message of the gospel that Jesus died to save sinners.

It was to the elect of God, though scattered, still meeting as churches that Peter instructs them to be **“good stewards of the manifold grace of God” (1 Peter 4:10)**. Paul, in 1 Corinthians 9:16 says that he was **“entrusted with the stewardship of preaching the gospel.”** And in 1 Thessalonians 2:4 he writes that they had been **“approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel.”**

An Entrusted Stewardship

God has entrusted the stewardship of His message to the church; not the publisher, the para-church, the government, or the media. The challenge to today’s popular view that church is somewhat expendable because I can conjure up a more meaningful and emotional spiritual event with my guitar at the beach fails to take into account the means by which God has preserved His message throughout His history.

Downplaying the importance of the church, in terms of our true godly spirituality is like people who downplay the importance of those principles which procured their country’s freedom. It’s like the pathetic and ignorant irony of one who burns a flag in a country that allows dissent. They seem to forget that the very principles they are fighting against are the principles that have afforded them their freedoms to act foolishly. Perhaps a short stint in another, less free, country would teach them a rapid lesson.

Be that as it may, the means by which God has preserved His word and revealed to us the true person and work of Jesus is His church; a church which belongs to Jesus and is being built by Jesus. And to ignore the importance of the church is to extract oneself from that venue God has ordained as His touch-point with mankind.

Years ago a sci-fi movie came out named *Stargate*, followed by a television show. It was about this interstellar teleportation device found in a pyramid in Egypt which leads to another planet or dimension. Jesus said to **“enter by the narrow gate”** (Matthew 7:13b) and by this we understand that gate to be Jesus Himself. Yet the pyramid (I speak as a man), in which the gate is found is Christ’s church.

The Body, The Temple

The millions of churches throughout the world where the word of God is heralded, the sacraments administered, His victory proclaimed and His praises sung are the points of contact between a fallen world and a

redeeming God. And to neglect Christ's church is to neglect Christ Himself for it is His very body; it is your body.

Peter writes that we are

...living stones...being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ (1 Peter 2:5b).

And Paul speaks of the interdependence of the body of Christ in the church,

...in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into __a holy temple in the Lord, ⁻²²⁻ _in whom you also are being built together for a __dwelling place of God in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:21b, 22).

It is this temple, the church, where the unique presence of Christ dwells, as we read in Ezekiel.

-Then I heard *Him* speaking to me from the temple, while __a man stood beside me. ⁻⁷⁻ And He said to me, “_Son of man, *this is* _the place of My throne and __the place of the soles of My feet, __where I will dwell in the midst of the children of Israel forever (Ezekiel 43:6, 7).

In light of this, the exhortation found in Hebrews takes on a much deeper meaning.

-And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works, -_not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together (Hebrews 10:24, 25).

May we as Christians recognize the supreme value of Christ and His church. It is precious to God; we therefore read of God's challenge to its shepherds:

Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit __has made you overseers, to shepherd the church _of God __which He purchased _with His own blood (Acts 20:28).

Questions for Study

1. Discuss common perceptions of the value of the church (pages 2, 3).
2. What is the church (page 3)?
3. What some different views on the rock or foundation of the church (Pages 3, 4)?
4. Discuss the merits and shortfalls of viewing Peter as the first pope (page 4).
5. Who or what is the foundation of the church? Explain (pages 5, 6).
6. What is the relationship of Jesus and His word (pages 6, 7)?
7. To whom or what has God entrusted His oracles (pages 7, 8)?
8. In what respect is the church the temple of God (pages 8, 9)?