

CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH

Matthew 16:18-20

Intro: The Apostle Peter would have had no idea of the significance of what the Lord was saying to him, and to the other disciples, on that day in Caesarea Philippi. The Lord had just told him that he was "blessed," or happy, beyond what men could ordinarily experience, because he had been able to identify the Lord Jesus so clearly and truthfully. And yet in the same statement the Lord did not give Peter the credit for what he had said, nor did He say that any other human being had taught him what Jesus was. He gave all of the credit and glory to the Father. Peter had come to understand the ultimate truth concerning His Master -- that He was the long-awaited Messiah, and that, although a real Man, yet "the Son of the living God."

Neither Peter nor anyone else could possibly have had the wisdom to figure this out on his own; it was a direct revelation to him from the Father. When Peter became convinced of this we do not know, nor how long he was in coming to it. But at this moment his understanding of Who the Lord was, was perfect!

However, we need to recognize that such a revelation from God to Peter was evidence that God not only was preparing to do something very important, but that Peter was to have a major part as a servant of the Lord. Peter is an important person in our thinking, but we must remember that at this point he was nothing but a lowly fisherman who had become a follower of this Teacher and miracle worker whose identity was still not known to most people. Notice that when the Lord asked what people were saying about Him, not one had the right answer.

We recently considered our Lord's words in verse 17; tonight I want to go on to consider what He said immediately afterwards, the words found in Matthew 16:18 and 19. (Read.)

The Lord's words directed to Peter here can be combined under two statements which He made:

- 1) "I will build my church." This is in verse 18.
- 2) "I will give."

Let us look at these under two headings:

- I. THE ORIGIN, FOUNDATION, AND SECURITY OF THE CHURCH in verse 18.
- II. THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH in verse 19.

- I. THE ORIGIN, FOUNDATION, AND SECURITY OF THE CHURCH (Matt. 16:18).

The Lord Jesus was about to begin, to bring into existence, what we can now call a body of believers which had never existed before. We can tell by the explanations of the church in the NT epistles that the Lord was not continuing something that had already been going, nor renaming something which already was in existence, but He was beginning something new. If you were here this morning, you will know what was involved if I tell you that this "church" is identified in the epistles as a NT mystery -- something which God had ordained before the foundation of the world, but only now was doing something about it.

The Church was not an organization nor a particular denomination, but a spiritual body of which Christ would be the Head and made up of people called out from the world, regenerated, baptized by the Spirit, joined to Christ and to one another as one body, to hold the same doctrines, and together to seek to spread the Gospel in every generation throughout the whole world until the Lord Jesus Christ returns.

Our Lord called it His Church because He is its Head, and He said that He was the One Who would build it. The very words suggest a time when the Church would be completed, but we must believe that every addition to the Church, every member added to the Body, every stone added to the Building, would in the final analysis be His work. "I will build my Church." When the Lord spoke these words He was revealing that one of the greatest of His works would soon begin. And yet we know from what verse 21 of this chapter tells us, that the Lord had another work to do before the Church was brought into existence.

You can see from what I have been saying that I do not believe that the Lord was giving a new name to the people of Israel. It is clear from what we have been learning in Romans that there is a future for the people of Israel. But the Church was something new. This was the first time that the Lord had mentioned it, and we know now that the Church would not be born until the Lord Himself was back in heaven.

But give these words entrance into your heart. Christ is building His Church, and therefore it cannot possibly fail. There have been times in Church history when it seems that the lamp would be extinguished, but it continues to burn in the Church, among the true people of God, even though we could wish that the testimony were much stronger than it is.

Now there is a play upon words in what our Lord said to Peter. He called Peter by his name, Petros, which means a rock. But then He went on to say that upon this petra "I will build my Church." This statement has been given many

interpretations throughout the years. Many feel that the Lord was saying that He was going to build His Church upon Peter. It is true that Paul in Ephesians spoke of the Church as being "build upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets," -- that is, NT apostles and prophets. We also know that Peter was very instrumental in the beginnings of the Church in the book of Acts. So it could have meant that Peter was to have a major role in the establishment of the Church in the days to come.

But the fact that the Lord changed the words for rock indicates to me that He had something else in mind instead of any of the suggestions I have mentioned. Coming right after this great confession of Peter, it would seem best to interpret our Lord's words, "and upon this rock I will build my church," as referring to that confession. The Lord is the Head of the Church. He is the foundation stone of the building which the NT speaks of. Therefore, if anyone is to be truly considered to be a part of the Church, he (or she) must be able to declare from the heart exactly what Peter said about the Lord Jesus -- that He is the Messiah, and that He in His flesh was none other than "the Son of the living God." Any deviation from this grand declaration excludes any person from being a part of the Church.

Local churches began to spring up throughout the Empire as the Gospel spread into the Gentile world, and false teaching began to spring up right away concerned who the Lord Jesus was. But our Lord's words stand, and we must recognize that they are still the basic test by which we must recognize believers. What a person believes about Jesus Christ is vital in any claim to belong to Him. There can be no change whatever from what Peter said that day when the disciples were being questioned by the Lord. The Father taught Peter what he said, and He alone teaches everyone else who has ever, or will ever, become a part of the Church, the Body of Christ.

But there is another thing that the Lord said: "And the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

The word translated "hell" is the Greek word Hades, and is generally recognized to be the NT synonym for the OT word Sheol. There are many things that we do not understand fully about these two words, but it does seem that it does not speak of "hell." Instead, it would be more proper to speak of it as the place of the dead. Now obviously death is the result of sin, and sin was Satan's objective for Adam and Eve when he tempted Eve in the Garden of Eden. More than that we can say that the consequences of sin will ultimately lead a person to hell unless forgiven by Christ. So much is in-

volved in this statement. Nothing can overcome the Lord in the building of His Church -- neither Satan, nor sin, nor all of the forces of hell. But I wonder if the Lord were not saying in this statement that death itself will never overcome the Church. The Church has had many great and powerful and influential leaders, and yet they have all died. And when a great leader dies, everybody gets apprehensive about what is going to happen to the Church. But history shows that while the apostles died, and great leaders too many to mention have died, yet the Church continues because the Lord Jesus never dies. He uses many instruments to accomplish His work, and they all eventually die, but the Church continues.

The Lord may have had more in mind that this, but it seems to me that this was one point that He was making. Even before men die, they often fail the Lord (as Peter did), but the Lord will not let His work fail. And the Church will continue to exist and grow and be influential until the Lord's work in the Church is finished.

But now let us go on to verse 19 and:

II. THE AUTHORITY OF THE CHURCH (Matt. 16:19).

The Lord said that to Peter would be given "the keys of the kingdom of heaven." Now a key is used for entrance through a door which is locked. And so the Lord was saying that to Peter and the Church would be given the "keys" for entrance into salvation. He did not mean that they could arbitrarily open the door or close the door to people. But going back to the declaration that Peter had made to the Lord, it is the business of the Church to proclaim and preserve the Gospel message which must be believed if people are to be saved. And not just to Peter, but to the Church which he was to have a part in establishing, people would either be bound to their sins and loosed from their sins. This is the divine authority conveyed upon the Church, the body of Christ.

See the statement about binding and loosing in Matt. 18:18. Relate to John 20:21-23. And then to Acts 2:37-40.

Remember that the Lord was not speaking about just an organization, but upon the true people of God which are brought together with a common faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. To believe that Jesus was the Messiah meant that Peter had come to understand that the OT promises of salvation would be fulfilled in Jesus Christ. There may have been many things which were not really clear to Paul, as they were still not clear to the other apostles, but the basic truth was there.

So what does this mean today? Does it mean that the Church decides who is going to heaven and who is going to hell? Of

course not! But it does mean because of the authority the Church has been given to proclaim the Gospel, that we can say with the fullest authority that people who believe what Peter believed about Christ will go to heaven, but that people who do not believe it will go to hell. The authority we have is in the message which we proclaim, an authority which is recognized and fully supported by God in heaven.

This is why the apostles preached as they did. This is why they were willing to face death day by day for the sake of preaching the Gospel. They knew that they had the truth, and they also knew that there was no other way for people to escape the judgment of God except through the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Concl: In the light of all of this, how strange it is to read what we have in Matt. 16:20. We would think that the Lord would send them out immediately to spread the Gospel far and wide. How can we explain this?

I don't know that I have the complete answer, but, for one thing, we do know that the Lord was still ministering to Israel. The command to carry the Gospel to the whole world had not yet been given. That could be one reason.

Furthermore, we know now that the coming resurrection of Christ would give the apostles their greatest proof of the Deity of the Lord. We learn that from Romans 1:1 ff.

And Matthew Henry has remarked, and I believe correctly, that the apostles were not yet indwelt by the Holy Spirit as they would be following the ascension of Christ. And the Holy Spirit's ministry would be needed to give success to their work.

Perhaps the biggest clue as to why the Lord spoke as He did according to verse 20 is the fact that He had said, "I will build my church," not that He was already building His Church. When this part of the Lord's work started, then would be the time for the apostles to spread the message of Christ and His saving grace to all.

Let us remember today that we have a message with divine authority, a convincing message. God honors the proclamation of truth concerning His Son. What the apostles may not have understood fully at that time, and may have proclaimed with confusion if they had gone out, later became crystal-clear to them, and we benefit from the teaching of their epistles. Great truths can be corrupted if they are proclaimed before they are adequately understood. So now is the time for this message to be proclaimed.