

August 7, 2016

A CONFESSION AND THE BUILDING OF THE CHURCH

Matthew 16:13-20

(7 of 31 in a series through Matthew 13-28)

You don't have to be around us at Cornerstone for a great while to see that we love the church. Now, I don't just mean that we love this church. Now that *is* true. I've even noted on a number of occasions that if I were ever fired as pastor, I'd try to get a job in Jackson so that I could remain a member of this church. In fact, all of the elders of the church were members of this church before becoming pastors. So, of course, we love our particular local church. But I mean that we love the church, generally.

We utilize time in our service often to pray specifically for other local churches. We believe and state consistently that the goal of missions is seeing the church planted and built up. Our pastoral internship program is weighted greatly on thinking through the doctrine of the church. We make a big deal of receiving individuals into the membership of the church, giving thanks to God for his grace to us. Then, when individuals move out of Jackson, we strongly encourage them to join another church quickly so that they might benefit from the oversight, accountability, teaching, care, and love of the church. The church is simply at the core of what we are about as we acknowledge and believe the scriptural promise from Ephesians 3:21 that our God will receive "glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen."

But where does this idea that the church is such a big deal or that the church has such a central role in the Lord's mission come from? Where does it start? The answer, in large measure, is that it starts with the words of Jesus in our text this morning. In fact, I think you could say that Matthew 16:13-20 is *the* foundational text (many others, of course, can be added to this) for thinking of the centrality and importance of the church in the mission of Jesus. What we see in our text this morning is that Jesus' mission isn't simply to have a number of individuals throughout the world and throughout the ages think rightly about him but to mark them off from the world, unite them together, and have them carry out his purposes as his established people—the church.<sup>1</sup>

Let me show you why I think that's what this text is aiming at by first walking through the elements and events in the text and then taking some time to think through what Jesus is saying here and what the implications of it are for us.

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<sup>1</sup>It's hard to express how thoroughly helped I have been in this sermon by reading the chapter titled "The Charter of Love" in Jonathan Leeman's book *The Church and the Surprising Offense of God's Love: Reintroducing the Doctrines of Church Membership and Discipline* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 169-228. I will make sure to footnote where quoting specifically, but I want to note that much of my thinking in this sermon comes from that chapter.

The text begins with Jesus asking his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (v. 13). They, of course, begin to give Jesus the common answers that groups are giving. They note that some say he’s John the Baptist. We saw this, for example, with Herod Antipas. Others say Elijah, knowing that the OT Scriptures promise the coming of Elijah before the Messiah, so if you don’t think Jesus is the Messiah, then you could at least see him as the Messiah’s forerunner, and many were. Others speak of him being one of the prophets, maybe even a resurrected Jeremiah or the sort. But, interestingly, according to these answers given by the disciples, there was no group out there confessing that Jesus is the promised Messiah.

But Jesus assumes that the disciples think differently from these named groups, so he asks them explicitly in verse 15, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answers, probably as a spokesman for the group, saying, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (v. 16). Now, this is probably not a full confession of Christ’s deity. Peter is probably not stating here that he believes Jesus is the God-man, God the Son incarnate. By saying he’s the Son of the living God, he’s probably picking up on the OT promises that the Messiah would be a Son to God (2 Sam 7:14), even as Adam (Luke 3:38), Israel (Ex 4:22), and Israel’s kings (Ps 2) were referred to as God’s “sons.” But this is a full confession that Peter (and the other disciples whom he represents) believes that Jesus is indeed God’s promised Messiah.

Jesus responds positively, noting, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (v. 17). That is, in light of Jesus’ earlier claim that no one knows the Son except the Father (11:27), Jesus is noting that if Peter rightly understands who Jesus, the Son, is, then it is only because the Father has graciously opened his eyes to this truth, revealing precisely who Jesus is to Peter. Peter hasn’t arrived at this truth based on his own wisdom and reasoning (i.e. “flesh and blood”) but by the gracious revelation of God.

And there are numerous lessons we can draw from this such as the fact that if we indeed confess Christ as Lord, it is only by the grace of God, and, therefore, we have no room to boast except in his gracious mercy toward us. It is as Paul says to the Corinthians, “What do you have that you did not receive?” (1 Cor 4:7). Therefore, let us boast in the Lord’s grace, evangelize faithfully, and pray that he will open the eyes of others as we speak the gospel to them.

Also, if I can go ahead and address the last verse, I think the reason that Jesus doesn’t want them to tell anyone that he is the Christ is because he doesn’t want to stir up responses from people who think that the Messiah has come for some political purpose and try to rally to the cause of overthrowing Rome. This isn’t his mission. Jesus knows that there’ll be a day after the resurrection where his church will proclaim him far and wide, but that day isn’t yet.

But instead of focusing on these issues, I want to spend our time this morning focusing on the rest of Jesus' answer to Peter because it is Jesus' further response in verses 18-19 that seem somewhat surprising, confusing, and weighty in light of the language used here. Why does Jesus, after all, move from Peter's confession to talking about his purpose to build a church that death itself (I think that's what is symbolized with the phrase "the gates of hell/hades") cannot destroy? Why does he talk about keys, binding, loosing, and actions on earth mirroring actions in heaven? This seems to be a big leap from Peter's accurate confession of Jesus when he could have just said, "That's right, Peter. Well done. That's exactly who I am. For all your stumbles along the way, it looks like you guys are going to be okay."

I think the reason Jesus doesn't simply say that but instead speaks of building his church is because he wants to make clear that *he is not merely interested in Peter and the other disciples knowing who he is; he wants many others to understand, to confess the truth of who Jesus is, and to be gathered together upon this truth Peter has stated.*<sup>2</sup> I believe that's the main thing this text shows us.

So, let's take it in steps. First, we can say that:

### **Jesus is building a united people around himself—the church**

In the OT, if you ask who are the people of God, one could be tempted to say that the Lord's people are made up of anyone who is a physical descendant of Abraham, whether they believe or not. But Jesus has already made clear in 3:9 that it is not enough to say, "We have Abraham as our father" because he could raise up children of Abraham from stones if he wanted to. In fact, the Pharisees and Sadducees that we saw in the text from last week might embody those who presume they're God's people, but the Lord had warned his disciples against their teaching, against their unbelief.

So, what's going on with Jesus' answer to Peter is Jesus is telling Peter that he's constituting a people around himself. That's why Jesus says "I will build *my* church." This is Jesus' church, and it'll be made up of those who confess and are gathered together upon this truth that Peter has just confessed.

Why then does Jesus begin that statement by saying, "I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church" (v. 18)? It's not because, as the Roman Catholic church teaches, that Jesus is saying that Peter is the first pope, and he's going to appoint one pope after another, world without end. What he's saying is that Peter (as a representative of the apostles) is going to be (along with the other apostles) the foundation of the church, a holy temple, a people who are going to confess this truth of

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid, 178; "Jesus doesn't say to Peter and the others, 'Great, now you know. You'll be just fine.' No, Jesus wants more people to understand the truth of who he is, and he wants them gathered together upon the truth that Peter has confessed."

who Jesus is in agreement with Peter. That's why Jesus plays on the term "rock," since Peter's name means rock. He, and the apostles along with him, will represent the foundation of a building, a people he is establishing. Second:

### **Jesus gives the church the authority to affirm publicly who does and who does not belong to and represent Christ**

Now, this statement may be a little trickier to accept than the first point, so let me walk through all the elements that I'm drawing from in this text to make this point. We've already seen that Jesus is building a people, his church, upon the foundation of the apostles (represented by Peter), and this people will be those who join with Peter in confessing that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God. So, how do I get from there to the claim that Jesus is here giving the church the authority to affirm publicly who does and who does not belong to and represent Christ? I do it in the following steps of observation:

1. By giving Peter keys, Jesus is giving the apostles authority to do something.

Jesus says to Peter, "I give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (v. 19). And throughout Scripture keys represent authority. So, for example, when Jesus is showing himself to be the one who reigns even amidst the suffering of his people, he notes in Revelation 1:18 that he holds the "keys to death to hades," meaning that he has authority over death.

2. The authority he gives is carried out in binding and loosing.

Jesus says, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (v. 19). So, if the keys represent the authority to bind and loose, then what in the world is binding and loosing?

Well, we're helped by a parallel text just two chapters later. In fact, the only other time in Matthew's gospel where the word "church" is used is in 18:17. There, Jesus gives commands about how to handle someone who is walking in unrepentant sin. In verses 15-18 he gives instructions, telling them to confront the individual privately, if he refuses to listen, bring one or two others with you, and if he refuses to listen then, tell it to the church, and if he refuses to listen to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile or tax collector. That is to say, let him be removed from the membership of the church.

And notice that right after giving the instructions for the unrepentant sinner to be removed from the church, Jesus adds, "Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (18:18). There, the loosing and binding is in reference to removing one from the church,

publicly affirming that this one is excluded from the church, not being a right representative of Christ.

Consequently, I think we're safe to assume that the authority to bind and loose is the authority to publicly affirm who does and who does not belong to and represent Christ. Historically, this is how the church has understood these terms as well. Calvin wrote, "The church binds him whom it excommunicates—not that it casts him into everlasting ruin and despair, but because it condemns his life and morals, and already warns him of his condemnation unless he should repent. It looses him when it receives him into communion, for it makes him a sharer of the unity which is in Christ Jesus."<sup>3</sup>

And if excommunication is the binding from fellowship with God's people, then baptism is the loosing or receiving into the membership of the church. For this very reason, I believe, Jesus marks off baptism from all of his other commands in Matthew 28:18-20. You remember Jesus tells us to make disciples of all the nations by baptizing them and teaching them to obey all that he has commanded? Well, if baptism is something he's commanded of believers (being their very profession of faith), then why doesn't he simply tell us to make disciples by teaching people to obey all that he has commanded? I think the answer is that baptism is marked off because it symbolizes their entry into the church, their reception into the church. Then, as one received into the church, they will be given oversight, guided, directed, equipped, and taught to obey everything that Christ has commanded. But it begins with this baptism by the authority given to the church whereby we publicly affirm this one professes the very faith confessed by Peter in Matthew 16:16.

And the reason I say it is the church that has this authority is because the Lord did not preserve the authority given to the apostles through a single man, like the pope, one after another. He preserved the authority of the apostles in the Scripture so that any church that obeys the practices the commands of Scripture is carrying out and acting on the apostolic authority. This is why the church has often (rightly) been referred to as the apostolic church. It carries the very authority to receive and exclude, to affirm and remove someone from membership in Christ's church.

Paul acknowledges this role and authority when he tells the Corinthians, concerning the unrepentant one in their church, "Let him who has done this be removed from among you" (1 Cor 5:2). And interestingly, he notes that they are to do this, "When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus" (1 Cor 5:4), meaning that no individual Christian carries this power to receive into membership or remove from membership but the gathered church, under the authority of Christ. Which leads to another point:

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<sup>3</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, *Library of Christian Classics*, vol. 20 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 1214.

3. When Jesus says that what we loose on earth is loosed in heaven and what is bound on earth is bound in heaven, he is saying that the church acts under and with the authority of Christ.

Jesus wants his church to know that what they do on earth is done with the authority of heaven. That's why he says what you bind and loose on earth will be bound and loosed in heaven. He's letting them know that they act with his authority. And think about how frequently Jesus sends this message. In Matthew 18:15-20, when he mentions the church binding and loosing again, he reminds them, "For where two or three are gathered [i.e. the formally gathered church] in my name, there am I among them" (18:20). That is, he's saying, "I'm with you. You're acting with my authority." I think the same encouragement is given in Jesus' words in the Great Commission when he reminds us that he is with us, even to the ends of this age as we go out making disciples, baptizing them and teaching them to obey all that Christ commands.

Now, this doesn't mean the church can't get it wrong. Of course we baptize people whom we think give credible professions of faith and they prove not to belong to Christ. At times churches have no doubt removed people over a charge of unrepentant sin that may have not been sin of any sort. Jesus isn't saying that the church also receives and removes people from membership in an infallible manner, but he is making clear that as a matter of principle, the church operates on behalf of the Lord. After all, it's *his* church that he's building, by the work of his Spirit, through his people, on the foundation of the authority of the apostles, preserved as the words of Scripture.

This is what Jesus was saying to Peter and the other apostles in these verses. He was telling them that he isn't interested in people merely confessing Christ as Lord, he wants them brought into his church which he gives the authority to publicly affirm that one is part of Christ's people or to remove them if they prove to depart from that confession and walk in unrepentant sin.

So, why then does all of this matter? Let me give you a few notes of application:

1. It means that if we as a church are to be obedient to the Great Commission, we must understand that our task is planting churches and building them up.

That is, Jesus didn't send us merely to evangelize so that people rightly confess him. He sent us to evangelize and then bring them into the body through baptism, oversee them, guide them, direct them, exhort them, walk with them, pray for them, and teach them to obey all that he's commanded as a part of his church. And unless that is our task we cannot rightly be said to be pursuing the mission that Christ has given his church. That's why Tom has said that he wants to start a moratorium on the word "missionary" and replace it with the term "church planter," just to get this point in our minds.

2. It means that you need to make sure you're joined to and ministering in and with a local church.

In other words, it is not by accident that we think of the Christian life corporately instead of individually. Jesus isn't ensuring that he has a number of individuals who rightly confess him on earth. He is bringing them together into a church (represented in local churches) that mark off who belong to Christ and rightly represent him.

And it's not sufficient to acknowledge the universal church. The universal church manifests itself in local churches where the Christ's commands are carried out. The Lord deals with his people in the Scripture through local churches. So, in order to love Christ's mission, we must love and cultivate love for the local church.

3. It means that we should see our weekly communion as a gracious affirmation from Christ's church that we who continue to profess faith in Christ and walk accordingly, belong to him.

What a gift the corporate proclamation of communion is. And it's one more reason why we don't baptize or take communion individually but as a corporate affirmation of the church, the authority found as we gather together.

Now, of course the church is not infallible. But what a blessing to week by week to be invited to this table and celebrate the means the Lord has given his church to publicly affirm that we belong to Christ. Let us then joyfully come to the table this morning. Amen.