

The Church Will Prevail

Matthew 16:13-20

Intro. 1) When one surveys the life of Jesus of Nazareth there are several particular moments that stand out like majestic mountain peaks that cause us to stop and gaze. There are of course the twin peaks of the incarnation or virgin birth and His crucifixion/resurrection. There is the experience of His baptism where He hears the declaration of His Father, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:17). This event was closely followed by another mountain peak, His temptation by the devil. Here our Lord demonstrated His worthiness to be our Saviour, as well as His devotion to be the kind of Messiah who would trust the Father all the way to the cross. To these we could add the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5-7), the feeding of the 5,000 (Matt. 14:13-21), His transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-8), the raising of Lazarus (John 11) and His ascension (Luke 24; Acts 1).

2) But there is another major happening we need to stop and examine, one that is particularly relevant in our day. The event was the occasion of Peter’s great confession of Jesus, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” and our Lord’s wonderful promise concerning the church, “I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.” This is a promise the church has needed to hear again and again throughout its history. This is a promise we desperately need to hear today. The Church is not at all well today. She is floundering and flailing about in theological and moral confusion. The Catholic Church is rightly ridiculed for sexual scandal in its priesthood. The Episcopal Church in America ordains as bishop a practicing homosexual. The United Church of Canada on August 13, 2003 “took just 45 minutes for delegates to approve the motion endorsing Ottawa’s move to legalize same-sex marriage” (*RNS*). Nations like Denmark suspend and then reinstate a Lutheran priest who says, “There is no heavenly God, there is no eternal life, there is no resurrection” (*RNS*, August 7, 2003). Evangelicals now regularly debate the possibility that there is salvation in other religions (pluralism/inclusivism), something the Catholic Church emphatically affirmed at its Vatican II Council in 1962-63. Others wish to discuss whether or not God knows the future, and in particular, does He know the freewill acts of human beings. And while we are at it, throw in the debate over seeker-sensitive, purpose-driven, and a renewed emphasis on Reformed Theology that runs the risk of out-reforming the reformers. Most of us cringe, and rightly so, when the popular pastor of a mega-church has his music team sing Pink Floyd’s “Brick in the Wall” before a message, or states boldly, “if you can lead people to Jesus through being gimmicky, then go for it.” (*Can We Do That*, pgs. 11, 29). Yet others I fear have become so entrenched in a Reformed system that I am not confident you would cross the street to witness to your neighbor if he was in the front yard on his knees screaming to the top of his lungs, “What must I do to be saved?” for fear you might somehow interfere with the work of the Spirit. I have a question, just who do you think drives a person to ask such a question?! I find nowhere in Scripture the devil doing the work of the Holy Spirit. John 16:8 is clear, it is the Spirit who “will convict the world of sin.” Yet the Spirit works through human instrumentality to get the gospel to the lost. Some of this persuasion I suspect are, as Vance Havner said, “as straight as a gun barrel theologically and just as empty as one as well.” Such a theology leads to a lack of passion and zeal for the lost, ignoring the words of Paul who said in

Acts 20:31, “I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears,” and who wrote in 2 Cor. 5:11, “Knowing, therefore, the terror of the Lord, we persuade men” and in 2 Cor. 5:20, “we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.” I am of course aware that public invitations can be abused and personal witnessing can cross the line from persuasion to coercion, but I don’t worry that too many of you are even close to that line. Yes, we have large churches, mega-churches, some of which are shallow and perhaps filled with too many who are unregenerate. Yet on the other side we have small churches with empty pews who seldom see the waters of baptism stirred by anyone. Like the liberals they rightly reject, they believe their smallness is a mark of their tough message. Flying under the banner of the “doctrines of grace,” they refuse to invite people to trust Christ, try their best to avoid personal evangelism in seminary or on the street, and they become so hardened in their views they can’t see how God in grace and mercy could elect all who die in infancy or never reach a state of moral discernment because our God is passionate to save the souls of human persons. Thus you have a church groping in moral and theological confusion.

You must be pessimistic then, given the current state of affairs? NOT AT ALL! I’ve read the words of our Lord and here, in this text, our Lord trumpets a word of hope that cannot be denied or defeated: The Church, My Church, will prevail! “I will build My church.”

3) This text is a bedrock for the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is essential both for our message and our methods. Here the church is confronted with a great question, announces a great confession, and moves forward with a great mission.

I. The Church Must Ask A Great Question. 16:13-15

- Jesus takes His disciples away from the crowds to the far northern area of Caesarea Philippi, 25 miles north of Galilee at the base of Mt. Hermon. Originally named Paneas after the Greek god Pan, the city was rebuilt by Herod the Great’s son Philip and renamed in honor of Caesar Augustus (31 BC – AD 14). It was an extremely pagan region, and yet it would afford Jesus greater privacy as He began to teach His disciples with greater intensity concerning what was ahead of them. This is the only time the gospels record that Jesus traveled in this area.
- Jesus was aware of both the popularity and confusion that swirled about who He was. He understood clearly something we need to understand as well.

1) Many people try to answer the question of Jesus. 16:13-14

- Jesus gathered His disciples together for a theological seminar. The time had come for some good, hard thinking. He put before them a question, “the question,” all persons must consider and answer: “Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?” The text may imply that He put this question to them repeatedly, several times.
- Their response is interesting, and reveals something of the variety of opinions already developing concerning the man called Jesus of Nazareth. Some said:

1. **John the Baptist** – risen from the dead, the view of Herod Antipas (Matt. 14:2), a powerful preacher of repentance

2. **Elijah** – a forerunner to the Messiah who is still to come as prophesied in Malachi 4:5-6
3. **Jeremiah** – a prophet of authority and compassion who wept and suffered over the nation of Israel
4. **One of the prophets** – someone important who boldly preached the Word of God in the face of opposition

All of these answers were honoring, none was derogatory. Yet no group was confessing Him as Messiah. These answers fell short of the truth of who He really is.

- It is possible to hold Jesus in high esteem, to think well of Him, and still get it wrong. To speak of Him as a great moral example, a God-intoxicated man like Schleiermacher and David Griffin, liberator of the oppressed as depicted in liberation theologies, or a Buddha as does the pluralist John Hick is to miss the mark, and miss it badly. Yes, many people, in many ways, try to answer the question of Jesus.

2) **You personally must answer the question of Jesus.** 16:15

- Hearing the results of popular opinion polls concerning His identity, Jesus turns the question in the direction of His disciples. I understand these are the ideas of who I am circulating out and about in the marketplace. From the palace to the common people I see there are a number of opinions being formed. However, I want to know what you think. “Who do you say that I am?” You have been with me, you have heard My words, seen My miracles, sensed My heart. What about you? What do you think? What do you say? What conclusion have you reached? The “you” is both plural and emphatic. Jesus is pressing the issue.
- This question which Jesus puts to His disciples He likewise puts to us. It is inescapable. You cannot run from it, you cannot dodge it. Like the hound of heaven it will track you down and demand that you give an answer. You, me, all of us, must personally answer the question of Jesus.

II. **The Church Must Announce A Great Confession.** 16:16-17

- We have come to a crucial intersection, a moment of truth. There is a tension in the air as the disciples consider the question of the ages and their response. Peter, as he often did, steps forward to speak on their behalf. Impetuous and often guilty of speaking and acting without thinking (see vv. 22-23!), Peter gets it right this time, and answers the question before him and before us with words that resound in the heart of every believer who has met the Lord Jesus. His response reveals two crucial truths concerning our response to Jesus.

1) **You must have an accurate conviction about Jesus.** 16:16

- “You are the Christ, the promised Messiah of Hebrew Scripture, the Son of the Living God.” Here is a confession that is a turning point in the life of the disciples and world history. Jesus has consistently referred to Himself as the Son of Man, an allusion to Daniel 7:13-14. Apocalyptic overtones are there and yet there is some ambiguity and mystery to the title. Now Peter steps forward and boldly proclaims that he’s got it. He sees it. Jesus is the Christ, God’s Messiah, but, and there is no way to overstate what he adds, “You are

the Son of the Living God.” Peter no doubt did not grasp all that this means, but he gets a grade of 100 for his answer. To affirm that Jesus was the Messiah was correct, but that He was the very Son of God, deity in human flesh, as he would later fully grasp, was a truth of enormous significance.

- How did he get this? Did he study it out, analyze the data? Did he have some type of mystical encounter that illuminated him to this? No. Peter came to this understanding exactly the same way we do. It was a gift from God.

2) You must have a divine revelation about Jesus. 16:17

- Jesus affirms Peter and his words, and then He tells him how it came to him. “Blessed” (happy) are you Simon, son of Jonah, you did not come to this on your own ability and insight, but in grace, My Father, who is in heaven revealed it to you. No mere mortal being could arrive at this on their own. The effects of the Fall and sin have so blinded human beings we could never see it without divine enablement.
- Jesus said in John 6:44, “No one can come to Me unless the Father who sent me draws him.” The Father drew Peter to Jesus and opened his eyes that he might see Him for who He truly is. He did the same thing for me as a boy at about the age of 9. Has He also done the same for you? You must have a divine revelation about Jesus.

III. The Church Must Answer With A Great Mission. 16:18-20

- Jesus blesses Peter and affirms his great confession. He then takes things forward, looks into the future, and provides the church with a promise that will free her to serve her Lord with a radical devotion and allegiance. What does Jesus say to His church? How are we to understand our mission?

1) We are a spiritual building. 16:18

- Jesus declares to Simon Bar-Jonah, “You are Peter (*Petros*), and on this rock (*petra*) I will build My church . . .” Few statements in Scripture have provoked more debate throughout the history of the church than this one. Exactly what did Jesus mean? What did Jesus mean by “this rock?” Five views stand out when we survey the interpretive playing field.
 1. The rock is Peter – the classic Roman Catholic position
 2. The rock is Peter’s confession – “you are the Christ, the Son of the Living God”
 3. The rock is Jesus Himself – 1 Pet. 2:5-8, after all, teaches that He is the chief cornerstone
 4. The rock is the revealed truth in general of Jesus’ teaching
 5. The rock is Peter as representative of all the apostles
- Numerous scholars have weighed in on the debate and point out that Jesus most likely spoke in Aramaic when He said these words and that Cephas (*kepa*) would have been used in both instances and therefore there is no play on the words *petros*, a small stone or rock, or *petra*, which speaks of a huge massive rock. What are we to say to this?
- I am convinced there is some genuine and legitimate complementarity to the above views. Jesus is addressing Peter and the confession which has just come from his mouth. It is this confession that constitutes the expression of who Jesus really is as the cornerstone of His spiritual building the church. Moreover,

Protestants should not overreact with a kneejerk response to Roman Catholicism's foolery with the papacy. Peter indeed plays an unprecedented role in the early stages of the church's birth and growth. As Don Carson rightly notes, he is "*primus inter pares* ("first among equals") and on the foundation of such men (Eph. 2:20) Jesus built his church" (Carson, 368).

- The word "church" (*ekklesia*) occurs only here and in Matt. 18:17 in all of the Gospels. The word will take on the meaning of individual Christian congregations, as well as all of God's people who have been redeemed by the blood of His Son. We are a spiritual building, His spiritual building.
- 2) **We engage in spiritual battle. 16:18**
 - The church of the Lord Jesus is a spiritual building called to engage a spiritual battle. The enemy is clearly marked in the latter part of v. 18, Hades. Hades represents the strength and stronghold of Satan, the kingdom of darkness and death. When the Son of God came into this world he launched an all out assault as He invaded enemy territory. The church is His bride, His body, His building and His battalion. We are to be on the offensive, taking the battle to the enemy, attacking its gates, tearing down the fortifications, "pulling down its strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God" (2 Cor. 10:4-5). As we engage the enemy we fear neither dying or death. Because the captain of our salvation (Heb. 2:10) has already won the battle, we fight not for victory, but from victory.
- 2) **We conduct spiritual business 16:19-20**
 - Jesus makes one additional promise and then adds a word of warning.
 - Jesus promises His disciples and His church the keys of the kingdom. The keys represent authority and the power to exclude or allow entrance into the kingdom. However, Jesus is quite clear where authority ultimately resides. What takes place on earth has its origin in heaven. The initiative is God's not man's, heaven not earth. The use of the future periphrastic perfect should be rendered, "whatever you bind on earth *shall have been* bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth *shall have been* loosed in heaven."
 - By the proclamation of the great confession that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God," Peter, the other disciples, and we, open the kingdom to many, but shut it to others. The same gospel which compels some to enter the kingdom of heaven drives others away. Yet what we do on earth has already been determined in heaven. It is God who is sovereign, not us. It is God who determines the destiny of souls, not us. It is God who determines and we declare. What Peter, the apostles, and we do by welcoming people into the kingdom who confess Christ, or by excluding people who reject Him, is simply the outworking of God's plan laid out in heaven.
 - Jesus concludes this theological seminar with a warning not to tell that He is the Christ. Why? What a strange request. But is it strange? Not really. The time will come when bold, world-wide proclamation is in order. Now, nationalistic zeal and feverous messianic expectations cloud the picture. The kind of Messiah that He is will require a cross, something He will now begin to explain (16:21-23). Events leading to that event are not to be short-circuited and harmed by a premature disclosure (Carson, 375). Further, our Lord has plans for more private

instructions for the disciples in the days ahead. This time will be necessary for their assignment following His ascension. For now bold proclamation can wait. In fact, it had to. The kind of Messiah He would be demanded it.

Conclusion. Peter's confession that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the Living God did not receive a warm reception in the 1st century. It eventually led to Jesus being nailed to a cross. Peter's confession does not receive a warm welcome in the 21st century either. In a day, very much like the 1st century, where pluralism, inclusivity and tolerance are the expectations of the culture, we cannot and should not expect that people will applaud this message. However, it is the truth, and an empty tomb stands as a monument to it. Therefore others may deny it, compromise it or even try to ignore it. We, on the other hand, will preach it, knowing that we must, and knowing as we do the church of the Lord Jesus Christ will prevail. Who is Jesus? I will tell you what I believe: "He is the Christ, the Son of the Living God." On that great confession, the church will prevail.