

I Will Build My Church

by Robert Griffith

Matthew 16:13-20

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

Simon Peter (got up all the courage he could and spoke out and said), "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter (petros), and on this rock (petra) I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

The central message of this passage which so impressed me is Jesus saying: *"I will build MY Church and it will fulfil its mission in the world. I will take responsibility for the building of my Church . . . I will build it on your confession and the gates of hell will ultimately not prevail against the Church that I build."*

Now I need to confess to you that I am one of those compulsive over-responsible type A personalities who has spent many years fretting about the state of the Church. I am concerned that the Church get in touch with God's love and grace and life-changing power - His Word - His authority, so that we can fulfil our calling in the world.

I don't believe the world has seen a fully alive Church yet. I long to see the sleeping giant wake up . . . I long for the world to see what the Church is really made of. When that day comes, it's going to be a big shock and I can't wait. It will happen - sooner or later and of course I want it to happen sooner.

So I am longing for the Church to live up to its calling and over the years I have tried to do my part in bringing the body of Christ into its full inheritance and calling. So I don't sit still and fret - I try to do something about it.

But then I read this passage and I am rebuked, but encourage to discover that I am not building the Church - it is not actually my responsibility. My responsibility is to confess Jesus Christ as the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God and it is Jesus who will build His Church. That reminder gives me peace. I wish it would give me more peace than it does, but I guess I need to learn to trust Him more.

Over three decades as a leader in the Church, I have seen many wonderful moves of God through His people which have brought renewal and life to depleted, declining congregations. Sadly, however, many of those moves of God have not been welcomed by some Christians - particularly those in leadership - who could not or would not accept anything new - they held on to the past with a death grip and were brutal and deadly in their condemnation of anything that threatened the status quo.

That really grieves me when I see God's own people standing against His initiatives just because they don't understand them or have not experienced God in that way before. But then I hear Jesus words again: *"I will build my Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church that I build."* And the Holy Spirit ministers that truth to me and it should do me more good than it does.

I have witnessed many 'movements' in the Church over the decades and each time I hear and I read the words of those who are blindly caught up in the latest trend and who fail to pray for discernment or test the spirits as the Bible warns us to. I fear for those who are just looking for another spiritual high without really discerning whether this new 'movement' is from God or man.

But then I am even more concerned about those who just as blindly and with equal or greater ignorance launch into the public arena with their wholesale condemnation of a movement as being emotional tripe at best and a world-wide deception of the enemy at worst. Some of the articles I've read and interviews I've seen over the years sent shivers up my spine. Respected Biblical teachers - who throw all caution to the wind and depart from all normal research criteria - and with a lot of emotion and very little care - write something off and declare that it cannot be from God.

They ignore the hundreds of thousands of testimonies of the deep and lasting fruit in those who have been blessed during that time of refreshing. Worse still, they ignore the very clear instructions to Jesus to judge such things by the fruit and too many are chopping down the young tree long before they even know what the fruit looks like.

Each time I have encountered that intolerance and tension in the Church I have cried out and say Lord, *'What are you doing?'* And each time He answers me in a very powerful way, *"I am building my Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against the Church that I build."*

Jesus Christ, my Lord and my saviour, my redeemer and my friend, has told me many, many times over the years to stop fretting - stop striving - stop worrying about these things. It is His job to build His Church and He has been doing just that for generations.

I have lost count of the number of times He has said to me, *"Let me do my job - you just do yours which is to confess me as the Christ, as Lord - the one who heals you, the one who saves you from sin, the one who has reconciled you to God and defeated your enemies. You need to proclaim that I am the Son of God ... that's your job and then: I will build my Church."*

That gives me a peace and a confidence because I know that I have been proclaiming Jesus Christ in all His fullness - I know that I have been preaching Christ and Him crucified for many years now and the assurance Jesus gives me is that He will build His Church - a Church so strong, a Church so in tune with God, a Church so filled and empowered by the Spirit of God that all the forces of hell itself won't stop it!

I want to look now at the power of the Word of God through us in this confession in Matthew 16. You see Peter said: *"You are the Christ, the son of the living God .."* and Jesus said: *"You're right but it wasn't your idea - that's the Word of God coming through you."* Do you understand? It's the Word of God coming through the mouth of a man and Jesus said it's on this testimony - it's on this rock - that He will build His Church.

Now I'm sure you know that this has been a problem text throughout the history of the Church. The Roman Catholic Church has understood that Peter is the rock on which the Church was built and therefore the whole doctrine of papal succession has evolved. Now I have some friends in the Catholic Church who are born-again believers so I do not want to pick a fight with them in any way, but I must simply say that it is a clear misunderstanding of the text.

The rock, the big rock that Jesus builds the church on is Himself - the testimony of Him is what He builds the church on. Let me show you how that works grammatically. The Greek word translated Peter is the word for little rock or stone. *Petros* is the Greek word for a small part of a big rock. It's what you would use to skip across the lake.

The big rock, when Jesus says on this rock, that word in the Greek is *Petra* - which means on this huge rock - this Ayers Rock - this rock of Gibraltar - on this huge rock I will build my Church, and you Peter are a chip off that big rock and I will use you as part of the building material.

It's a difficult passage and it's one of those times when a little knowledge of the Greek helps enormously in understanding the true meaning. Now this is a wonderful affirmation for Peter - because Jesus is saying to Peter: *"Despite your instability, I see you as having rock-like character. The Father just spoke to you and through you - I can use you Peter to build my Church."*

Jesus says: *"Peter, I see - despite your weakness, despite your performance..."* I mean at this point in time Peter wasn't a rock he was a spontaneous sand blast . . . at best . . . according to his performance. But Jesus looks at him and says: *"Despite that instability, you are a rock . . . I see in you quality building material."* What a wonderful affirmation for Peter to get. And friends that same affirmation comes to you today.

Let me just illustrate this. Turn to 1 Peter 2:4-5 and let me show you how this works. Now remember this is 1 Peter - Peter writes this. Study this carefully because Peter remembered what Jesus said back in Matthew 16.

"As you come to him, the living Stone (notice the capital S, that's the word for the big rock) rejected by men but chosen by God and precious to him - you also, like living stones, (notice, small s - the word for little rock) are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." (1 Peter 2:4-5)

Big stone = living stone, little stone = living stones. So what this says to us today is that Jesus is in our midst as the rock of Gibraltar - and we are quarried out of Him - taken out of His body and being built into His body . . . taken out of the big stone - chips off Him as He sees it . . . and He's going to use us to build the Church which will accomplish His purposes in History.

The big stone, Jesus, and those who resonate with that big stone through their testimony . . . He will use together with the big stone to build my Church and the gates of hell will ultimately not prevail against it. And so here are these two pictures. When you put them together it's sort of odd - but it's the best that Biblical writers can do because they are dealing with things that language doesn't accommodate.

God's point in all this is that your confession of Jesus - your weak confession of Jesus as the Christ - the Son of the living God, identifies you as that living rock, living stone building material that He uses. And as we are built up together - and I stress together - as living stones - on our own we are just a little stone, together - we form the Church that the gates of hell will not prevail against.

You can go out there on your own and get your head kicked in spiritually. You can go out on a solo mission and be blown away by the forces of evil that are out there. But Jesus promises that when we are built together into one body - the little stones become part of the big stone and the big stone has already conquered evil.

It's hearing and acting on the testimony of Jesus as the Christ and the Son of God, along with the other living stones that makes us invincible against all the powers of hell.

However, many of us feel defective and unworthy because of our performance and what Jesus is saying is *"No, no, no . . . it's not your performance that makes you good building material. I haven't selected you because of your performance."* He didn't select Peter on that basis, did he? No! Peter was an impulsive, weak-kneed erratic mess! Not just during his time with Jesus, but after Jesus was arrested he denied him and deserted him and then during the early years of the Church - this rock man Peter made a few monumental blunders and had to be pulled into line by Paul at one point.

So it wasn't Peter's performance that made him the little rock - the building material for the New Testament Church - it was his confession ... and that confession came from God ... flesh and blood did not reveal this to Peter, our Father in heaven gave him this insight.

Peter's confession of Christ qualified him - not his performance. Now you may say: *"I'm not much, I don't have many gifts, I'm not very good at this or that .."* and you might focus on the fact that you don't live up to some abstract standard of spiritual greatness. Well let me settle this for you once and for all. I'm going to ask you a question - it's not a rhetorical question - I want you to answer it.

Is Jesus the Christ, the Son of the living God?

If you can sincerely answer yes then you qualify. Don't ever doubt it! If you believe Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, then you qualify for that which God uses to build his invincible Church!

You may be familiar with Paul's prayer in Ephesians 1 when he prays that the eyes of our heart may be enlightened in order that we may know the hope to which he has called us, the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and his incomparably great power for us who believe.

That is my prayer for you today . . . that you would have the eyes of your heart opened - that you would open up your eyes and see who you are in Christ - and not who you are not in terms of your own personal performance.

"Who do men say that I am?"

Well this, that, the other, a good teacher, a wise man, prophet . . . I don't know.

"But what about you? Who do you say I am? You can't use the world's opinion - they wouldn't know . . . what do you say?"

Well I say you're the Christ - the Messiah - the Son of the living God.

"Well great - now we can get on with it."

Don't get bogged down in your daily performance. Don't get bogged down in your past failures. Don't get bogged down in what you think is reality. Just lift your eyes to the real reality - to the Ayers Rock - the Rock of Gibraltar - the living Stone - around which history revolves - the Rock from which you come as a little stone - you are quarried out of that Rock and together with millions of other living stones you are built into that Rock.

Let's look closer at Peter's confession in verse 16. He said you are the Christ the Son of the living God. So there are the two affirmations Christ (or Messiah) and Son of God.

Every Jewish boy grew up knowing that there would come a day when the Messiah would come. He would come and take His place at the head of God's people. He would assume the role of Commander in Chief of the army of God and He would lead God's people out of bondage - he would lead God's people into healing, into prosperity. He would lead them into intimacy with them. He would do this with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm.

And we would all gladly bow before this ruler - this king of kings, this Commander of the Lord's army - we would all bow before Him and bend the knee before Him - and eagerly serve him because He will rule with a rod of justice and peace and love. We will finally have a leader that we can commit to and give our total allegiance to. So when Peter is confessing Jesus as the Christ - the Messiah - he is identifying Him as that rock that the Scriptures spoke of Who would crush all the enemies of God. So this is a lofty, majestic picture of Jesus - the Christ - Messiah of God.

Then Peter says the next thing - you are the Son of the living God. Now notice at the beginning of the passage Jesus said: *"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"* Son of man - Son of God in both Old Testament and New Testament are mixed together in some mysterious way. But the point is that this Messiah who would come would not be some spiritual abstraction - He would be a real man. God becoming one of us.

"Behold a virgin will conceive and give birth to a son..." this Messiah is one of us. He has the scars on his hands and his feet that we put there! He's one of us. This majestic king would be one of us. He would know from inside his belly our anxieties, our fears our frustrations, our failures. He would care for us from a human heart.

Many people think that the goal of a true Christian is to become less and less human and more and more spiritual - as if those two things cannot co-exist. What we should be about as Christians is becoming more real, more human, more natural in the right sense of that word. The only truly authentic human being to ever to walk this earth was Jesus - so wanting to be like Him is great - but let's not forget that He was fully human as well as Divine. When we lose touch with that real world of humanity - we are denying Jesus as the Son of man.

Jesus is the Messiah - there's no doubt about it. He changed history. He's the king, He's the deliverer He's all that and more but He was one of us too - He was a real person. It's because Jesus was a real man that children ran to Him. It's because He was a real man that women trusted themselves to Him. They felt comfortable in His presence.

And men, real men, flocked to Him and submitted gladly to His leadership because He was real. He was the maximum man. The only reason the non-Christian world comes up with films like Jesus Christ Superstar and Jesus of Nazareth is because the world is crying out for a God with a human face - and that's who Jesus is. They're hungering for the divinity and perfection and the holiness of God that you can touch and that's who Jesus is and that's what the Church is supposed to be.

Great authority to heal the sick to preach the gospel to prophecy to society - YES!
To proclaim the favourable year of the Lord and to break bondages - YES!
To set captives free and to assure people that they will live forever with God in the presence of His holy angels - YES!
Spiritual power and spiritual authority - YES!
and He's normal. He's a real person.

Jesus is calling us to confess with Peter that He is the Messiah - the king of kings and Lord of Lords - there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved - He's it everybody else isn't. He's God and nobody else is. Buddha and Mohammed - stand in line - there's only one.

We are to proclaim that, and yet in the midst of His people He goes to picnics - He enjoys wedding parties - He touches hurts - He cries tears - He eats with sinners and then He dies for their sins so they can live forever. I guarantee you that if the Church gives society that Jesus - the real Jesus if we confess Him to our city - there won't be a building big enough to hold the people.

If we do this, if we confess Him as Messiah and Christ, if we confess Him and live in Him as Son of God, Son of Man - one of us - then Jesus will have the tools He needs to build a Church against which all the powers of hell will not prevail. They'll try ... O how the enemy will try to fight such a confession ... but Jesus has promised us that Satan will lose that battle ... for there is no power in this universe that can stand against such a sincere confession.

So be encouraged by the Lord today. He will build His Church. He is building His Church in your town, your city and right around the world. He is building that Church wherever the word of God is preached and Jesus Christ is exalted.

If you're worried about numbers and think that big is not beautiful and that we shouldn't get too focused on numbers, let me say this as kindly as I can - snap out of it! Read the Bible! God is passionately interested in numbers. Aren't you glad that He was interested in your number, when He reached down and grabbed you from that roller-coaster ride to hell and put you on the road to glory - aren't you glad He was interested in numbers that day? Well friends that roller-coaster is still running and it's still got millions of people on it.

Church growth is not the latest trend in ministry from America. It's not the latest fad to be debated by the modern day Scribes and Pharisees - Church growth is a Biblical mandate. It's a command! Now the way we see Churches grow has attracted all sorts of wild ideas and movements - some of them helpful - some of them not. But friends the Lord wants us to hear his words again today: "*I will build my Church.*"

The only question we have to answer is this: Do we want Him to build it where we are? Do we want Jesus to build His Church through us? Or will we resist Him and struggle against the obvious changes that occur as Churches grow? Will we effectively tell Him to use someone else - to go somewhere else - because we like things the way they are or the way they were - we want our comfort and our familiarity.

Will Jesus build His Church through us?

I know my answer to that question.

How about you?

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