

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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The Church of Christ: I will build my church

What is the largest building in the world? The tallest tower in the world is just over one third of a mile high. It took two years to build and cost £40 million. That's in Toronto, Canada. The biggest palace in the world has around 2,000 rooms and an underground garage for 153 cars. It cost £300 million to build. That's in Brunei. Today, we are going to think about an even greater building: that spiritual building, the Church, referred to by the Lord Jesus in His momentous words to Peter and the other disciples at Caesarea Philippi: "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). This building has been going on now for nearly two thousand years and it is still not complete! In its extent, it embraces men and women, boys and girls, from the four corners of the world. The cost of building it cannot be reckoned, even in billions of pounds. It cost the Son of God His life - "the precious blood of Christ", as Peter calls it in 1 Peter 1:19.

The Bible uses at least three important illustrations to describe the Church. These are the Body of Christ, the House of God, and the Bride of Christ. Each of these pictures emphasises a particular aspect of the Church's life and mission. The Body of Christ, linked to its Head in heaven, Christ, emphasises its living nature, its total dependence upon the Head, and the absolute necessity for its members to act in obedience to the Head.

The House of God emphasises the character of the One who lives there. As I walk down the street, I see a well-kept house, nicely decorated, in good repair, neat and tidy. But then I pass another house, ill-kept, dirty, falling apart. Each of those houses sends me a message, though very different messages, about those who live there.

The Bride of Christ emphasises the particular place which the Church enjoys in the love of Christ, that place of nearness to Him, and the glory which one day she will share with Him.

In the next three talks, we will, God willing, consider each of these in turn. But today, by way of introduction, we want to look at some fairly basic questions regarding the Church:

- The Church - what is it?
- The Church - who are in it?
- The Church - what will happen to it?

In all these questions, it goes without saying that what matters is not what might be the popular view, or what might be politically correct, but rather what the Bible teaches about these things.

It will be helpful, however, to look first at the background to the words of Jesus to which we referred at the beginning of this broadcast. After the broadcast, please take time to read carefully through Matthew 16. Jesus had just been warning His disciples against the evil teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Their headquarters was Jerusalem. So Jesus takes His disciples to Caesarea Philippi, a town on the northernmost edge of Galilee, about 120 miles from Jerusalem. This was about as far away from Jerusalem as it was possible to be in the land of Israel.

There, far removed from Jerusalem with its unbelief and false teaching, Jesus asks His disciples firstly, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" (verse 13). The disciples replied, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (verse 14). This reply indicates, at best, total confusion on the part of the people, and at worst, a total indifference that was not prepared seriously to consider what Jesus was saying and doing amongst them.

Jesus then puts to them this absolutely vital question, "But who do you say that I am?" (verse 15). It is Peter's response to this question, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (verse 15), that moves the Lord to say those important words, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it".

The Church - what is it?

We can now turn to the questions we posed earlier. The Church - what is it? It is important to notice that the verse we have been considering is the first time the word 'church' occurs in the Bible. The Greek word, '*ekklesia*' (from

which we get our English word, 'ecclesiastic'), simply means 'a called out people'. That same word, 'ekklesia', is translated 'assembly' in Acts 9.

Jesus' words "I will build" clearly indicate that this was to be a future event. It is important to recognise that here, at the outset, we have emphasised the distinctive nature of the Church. Here was to be an entirely new thing! The Church had no existence in Old Testament times - not in the Tabernacle in the wilderness nor in the Temple in Jerusalem.

In passing, it might be pointed out Stephen's reference to Moses and "the church in the wilderness" (Acts 7:38) might be better translated as "the congregation (or, assembly in the wilderness".) Stephen refers, of course, to the Israelites whom God had called out of Egypt to be His people. At no time in its history, in the past or in the future, is the nation of Israel the Church. The Church was to be an altogether new thing, brought into being as a result of the coming into the world of the Lord Jesus and His subsequent death, resurrection and ascension to heaven. That Church, as we shall see, came into being on the day of Pentecost, the first Whit Sunday, and will continue in the world only until that time when the Lord Jesus comes to take her home to heaven.

The Lord Jesus refers to it as "My church". It belongs exclusively to Him because He died for it: "Christ...loved the church and gave Himself for it" (Ephesians 5:25). The Church does not belong to any man or woman, however saintly, nor to any group of people. It belongs exclusively to Christ and, as such, He has absolute rights over it. It is vital, then, that we find out from the Bible what He has to say about the worship of the Church and about the work of the Church in the world.

The Church - who are in it?

And so to our second question, "The Church - who are in it?" We have seen that it was as a result of Peter's declaration of faith, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" that the Lord Jesus began speaking about building His Church. Peter's first encounter with Jesus had been a very special day. You can read about it in John 1. He was called Simon then. His brother, Andrew, had come home bursting to tell the news: "We have found the Messiah (or, the Christ)" (verse 41). Peter was brought by his brother to Jesus to hear Jesus say to him: "You are Simon the son of Jonah. You shall be called Cephas" (verse 42).

Cephas is derived from the Greek word, '*petros*' (and hence our word, Peter) meaning a stone i.e. a stone that might be thrown or easily moved. The word contrasts with '*petra*', meaning 'a mass of rock' i.e. a sure foundation, of which more later.

In Bible times, a master might acquire a slave. Along with the right of ownership went the right to give that slave a new name, if the master so chose. In giving Simon a new name, the Lord Jesus showed that there had been a change in Simon's life. Simon was serving a new Master now, the Lord Jesus. From then on, Simon Peter had the opportunity of both seeing the things Jesus did and listening to what He had to say. He had seen Jesus cure his mother in law who had been ill. He had seen Jesus feed 5,000 people using only the picnic lunch which a young lad was willing to give to Jesus. Through these experiences, and countless others, Peter's faith in Christ grew so that, when Jesus challenged His disciples, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter was able to answer with assurance, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (verse 16).

Caesarea Philippi, where Peter made this confession, was noted as the place where Herod the Great had built a marble temple to Augustus Caesar, who had given him the town. It had previously been known as Paneas, but Philip the tetrarch later renamed it Caesarea in honour of the emperor. To distinguish it from the coastal town of Caesarea, the name 'Philippi' meaning 'of Philip' was added. Here was a place of Roman pomp and glory. Roman emperors were thought to be gods. But Roman emperors and Roman gods die! Against this background, Peter's emphasis, "The Son of the living God" is all the more wonderful. Peter knew that here was none other than the living God, living and at work in the world for the blessing of His creatures.

Peter had not arrived at this conviction as a result of his own reasoning. Jesus answers him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven" (verse 17). As a result of Peter's confession, Jesus says, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (verse 18).

The Church could not be built on Peter! Although, as we have seen, Peter's new name meant 'a stone', it was a stone which could be moved. Indeed, immediately after this, Peter dared to rebuke Jesus for speaking about His impending death. Jesus then had to say to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan!" No, the rock ('*petra*') is that statement of faith Peter made about the Christ, the Son of the living God. Therefore, the rock on which the Church would be built could be none other than Christ Himself, that immovable, sure foundation. But built on the sure foundation of Christ Himself, and forming part of Christ's Church as living stones, would be Peter and countless others who, like Peter, had come to similar faith in Christ.

It is striking that immediately following Peter's confession, the Lord Jesus, for the very first time, begins to warn the disciples about His impending death. Matthew tells us: "From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day" (verse 21). The Lord Jesus knew only too well, as Peter and the rest of the disciples would later learn, that before Peter, or any of the disciples, or any of us, could have any part at all with Him, He must die to atone to God for our sins. But even here, as Jesus speaks of His death, He also insists on the mighty victory of His resurrection!

We have already noted that, in this first reference to the word 'church' in the New Testament, Jesus says, "I will build". That Church was not yet in existence. Apart from one brief reference in Matthew 18, the word 'church' does not occur again until Acts 2:47: "And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved". Here at Pentecost, when The Holy Spirit came down from heaven to form the disciples into the one Body of Christ, is the birthday of the Church. Peter was part of that Church. But so also were many of those who listened to Peter's preaching on that day. Peter had charged the Jews in Jerusalem with the crucifixion of the Lord Jesus: "Him, being delivered by the determined counsel and foreknowledge of God, you have taken by lawless hands, have crucified, and put to death" (Acts 2:23). When the Jews turn to Peter and the other apostles and ask, "What shall we do?", Peter replies, "Repent, and let every one of you be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (verse 38). And so we read, "Then those who gladly received his word were baptised; and that day about three thousand souls were added" (verse 41).

Have you been added to Christ's Church? It is not a matter of joining any particular church but of believing in Christ and being added by Him to His Church. You may say, "But like Peter, I need a revelation from the Father". In His word, the Bible, God has given us today a full revelation of His Son - His birth, His atoning death at Calvary, His resurrection, His ascension back to heaven. We need to believe that revelation, to trust Christ as our Saviour.

This Church of Christ is made up of all those believers from Pentecost up until the time when the Lord Jesus returns from heaven to take His people to be with Him forever. Note that, in the Bible, the Church is always people, not a building. When we use the word 'church' today, we so often think of a building, be it a magnificent cathedral or a modest mission hall. What matters to God is not the building but the people inside the building! So Paul writes to Philemon, "the church in your house" (verse 2). Philemon's house was not the church. The Christians who met there comprised the church.

The Lord Jesus refers to it as "My Church". It belongs exclusively to Him. No saint, no monarch has this right over it. He alone has sovereign right over it. Christians as they meet together must recognise this fact. By the direction of His Holy Spirit alone, the Lord Jesus would guide His Church in its worship and witness.

The Church - what will happen to it?

Finally, to our third question: The Church - what will happen to it? The Lord Jesus goes on, "... My Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it".

In Bible times, cities were known for their gates. The security of the citizens depended on the strength of those gates. Those who governed the city came to be known as those who sat in the gate. The gates, then, came to be associated with power. The Lord Jesus declares that no power will destroy His Church. The Romans tried it, but the more they persecuted the Christians the more numerous they became. So it was said, "The blood of the martyrs became the seed of the church". In our lifetime, Communism tried and failed. We have seen the fall of communism in Russia and elsewhere, but the Church in those former communist dictatorships continues.

Hades is the place of departed spirits, as distinct from hell, the place of eternal judgement. It corresponds to Sheol in the Old Testament. The Lord Jesus assures us that not even death itself can overcome His Church. Indeed, Paul tells us that on that day when the Lord Jesus comes to take His Church to be with Him, "the dead in Christ shall rise first." He goes on, "Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17). What a lovely hope of all who belong to Christ and so form part of His Church!

We end with Paul's doxology from Romans 8:38-39: "For I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord". Amen.

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