

Sermon: Matthew 16:18, the Builder's Promise: 'and I say to you, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church.'

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Brothers, I am very happy to remind you that Christ has promised to build his church. This promise is found in Matthew 16:16-18. In the form in which the promise is stated two things stand out, Christ's pre-eminence as Builder and the way he exercises his prerogative in choosing the agents and means of building. These will be the focus of our attention tonight.

You will see that we are dealing with general truths and not detailed analysis. Much detail has become available to the church over the years suggesting ways and means of 'growing' the church. Disciplines like missiology, anthropology, linguistic analysis, and hermeneutics feed ideas to the discussion, perhaps to the point where we cannot see the wood for the trees. It is therefore no bad thing to return to first principles and focus again on the general truths that under-gird what we are doing.

It means considering building the church from the standpoints of principle and practice. *In principle*, Christ's promise reserves the decision to him and relieves us of that responsibility. We do not have to decide what to build or how to build it. The project from design to completion is exclusively his. That is the position *in principle*.

In practice, however, we have responsibilities. In his pre-eminence as Builder, Christ chooses men as sub-contractors and as such we have to take decisions, but always under the authority of the Builder. We must understand his plan, work according to it, use the right tools and methods and take account of prevailing conditions. That is the position *in practice*. You might think that this demands more detailed analysis and practical application but I do not intend to go there tonight. My decision to be general is deliberate.

Christ's pre-eminence as Builder

We turn first, to Christ's pre-eminence as Builder. In Matthew 16:16-18, Peter's confession '*You are the Christ, Son of the Living God*' (16) is followed by our Lord's statement that Peter is blessed in as much as his confession did not come as a human insight but as a revelation of God the Father (17). After this, the Lord declares '*and I say to you, you are Peter; upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it*' (18).

Verse 18 is grammatically simple, beginning with the emphatic personal pronoun 'I' combined with the conjunction 'and'. The same pronoun is implicit in the verbs 'I say' and 'I will build'. Finally, the object 'church' is qualified by the possessive pronoun 'my'.

From a grammatical point of view it would be impossible to assert Christ's pre-eminence more clearly. He is in every part of the sentence and in every part of the promise. He *is* pre-eminent! The church, first to last, is his. I read recently but have not been able to verify it, that our Lord uses the possessive pronoun 'my' of no other earthly entity beside the church, under its various biblical descriptions ('my sheep' etc.).

Why such an interest in the church? Christ is interested in it because it is his by endowment - the Father's gift to his Son. God the Father gave the sheep to the Good Shepherd in eternity. No one will ever take them from his or the Father's hand. (John 10: 29) They were chosen in Him '*before the foundation of the world, to be holy and*

without blame before him in love'(Eph. 1:4) so that there was never a moment when the church was not before him.

The church is his also by right of redemption. He *'purchased with his own blood.'* The church is not free but captive in a blessed bond of ownership. This includes us as under-shepherds or, to continue the metaphor of building, those who are sub-contractors. *'[We] are not our own; [we] were bought with a price'* (1Cor. 6: 19,20) and are all part of Christ's purchased possession. What an astonishing evaluation of the church! *'For you were not redeemed with corruptible things such as silver and gold ... but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a Lamb without blemish and spot.'* (1Peter 1:18-19) Breath-taking!

On this basis we can say that the church is the special object of Trinitarian interest. All true members of the church are *'elect ... according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, to obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.'* (1Peter 1:2) The message of covenant love rings out loudly from the page of Scripture: *'How can I give you up ... How can I hand you over?... My heart churns within me; my sympathy is stirred.'* (Hosea 11:8)The Son is especially interested in the church's welfare because it is his by endowment and by right of redemption. He will never give it up.

In this way the promise of Matthew 16:18 expresses Christ's pre-eminence as Builder. He is pre-eminent in everything because he is *'first-born of all creation'* and *'first-born among many brothers'* - He is Head, True Vine, Bridegroom, Owner, Architect, Foundation, Chief Cornerstone and Builder of the church. He and the church belong together. John Murray writes *'We cannot think of [him] properly apart from the church. All the offices he exercises as head over all things, he exercises on behalf of the church.'* (Collected Writings, 1, 238). *And we cannot think of the church apart from him.* As the writer to the Hebrews writes, *'See how great he is!'* (7:4)What does this mean at ground level?

It speaks to any tendency we might have to seek *personal pre-eminence*, a tendency that will always compete with his pre-eminence. The pre-eminence of Christ addresses the quest for position, even celebrity and reminds us that we are bond-servants. Paul writes *'Let a man consider us as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God. It is required in servants that one be found faithful.'*(1Cor. 4:1-2)

It also speaks to feelings of self-sufficiency that might lead us to think that our weaknesses are our strengths. Feelings of self-sufficiency go hand in hand with the quest for position and an inability to take advice. Such a person is unteachable. In his commentary on 1Corinthians Calvin writes, *'those that intrude themselves confidently [into the ministry] and in a spirit much elated, or who discharge the ministry of the word with an easy mind, as though they were equal to the task, are ignorant at once of themselves and of the task.'* In these and other ways the pre-eminence of Christ cautions us about thinking of ourselves more highly than we ought.

But it also encourages us in the midst of opposition, lack of visible results and our own frailty to persevere in the knowledge that Christ will build his church. Some of us see little growth. Covenant children prove to be a disappointment, conversions are few we don't seem to have what it takes to overcome. HE has promised to build his church and his promise guarantees final victory. Even the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

Christ's prerogative as Builder

We come now to Christ's prerogative as the church's Builder. It is his right to choose other builders and it is expressed in the words *'I say to you, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church.'* Protestant reaction to

the way the church of Rome 'high-jacked' these words led to the idea that *petros* refers to Peter, the feminine *petra* (rock) refers to his confession. This is the rock on which the church is built. The English commentator Matthew Henry asserted that *'Nothing can be more wrong than to suppose that Christ meant the person of Peter was the rock.'* But we do not have to choose between Peter and his testimony since Christ's statement includes both. Ridderbos says that our Lord clearly meant the person of Peter but not to the exclusion of his confession. Carson argues that *petros* and *petra* are a word-play and that they refer to the historic role of Peter and the apostles in the initial stage of building the church.

We can put it like this, Peter is the agent of building and his confession, the means. Peter and those with him were the primary agents of building in the first period of the church. What he confessed they all preached: Jesus as Lord and Christ. Afterwards, the apostle Paul did the same. Acting as God's appointed agent, along with others, he laid a foundation of preaching and teaching for others to build on: *'According to the grace of God which was given me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation and another builds on it. Let each one take care how he builds on it'* (1Cor. 3:10). He then sets all this in the Christological context by adding *'For no one can lay a foundation than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ'* (3:11). Every pastor-teacher does the same thing, building on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ being chief cornerstone (Eph. 2:20).

From the human perspective Christ's choice of sub-contractors is unimpressive. They are mere men, clay pots, ordinary folk – fishermen, tax collectors – nondescripts! But we understand that the treasure is put in a clay pot in order that the excellence of the power might be his, not ours. He must be pre-eminent.

Also from the human perspective the choice of sub-contractors might seem very foolish since sub-contractors are often unreliable, starting but not finishing, using cheap materials which do not last and generally doing more to harm the building than to help it. Surely great wisdom and care are needed in selecting people to assist in the work of building the church.

So what did Christ do? He carefully chose those who would be fishers of men and mentored, trained, taught, equipped and eventually commissioned them to preach, teach and make disciples of others: it was a steep learning curve! He gave them the Holy Spirit to remind them of everything he had taught them and to teach them everything else they needed to know. Above all, through the Spirit, he kept his promise to be personally involved in the work of building his church and not to leave them as orphans. He did not send his helpers to quarry the stone and build all by themselves. He said 'I am with you always, even to the end of the age.' Paul testified *'I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.'*

Then there are the means or instruments. This brings us face to face with Peter's confession *'You are the Christ, Son of the Living God'* and the importance of the means of grace. It is at once the foundation and building blocks of church-building. Christ builds his church by means of the gospel and more broadly, the word of God. He commissioned the apostles to go into the world and preach and teach, making disciples of the nations, baptising them in the name of the Trinity and teaching them to observe everything he had commanded them.

This is the apostolic tradition, the faith once for all delivered to the saints and the sacred deposit (*paratheke*) to be taught and guarded by those to whom it is committed (1Tim 6:20). It is the form of sound or healthy words to be followed for the church to flourish and be protected from Satanic incursions (2Tim 1:13) and no creativity on our part is necessary. Contextualization is a word much used and we must certainly preach and teach in a language understood by the people – but without change. There is no such thing as an African or Indian

theology – only theology.' *It is required in servants that one be found faithful*' (1 Cor. 4:2) and no requirement is placed on us beyond that. We sometimes need to stop and ask what we are doing which Christ never asked us to do. The apostles would not wait at tables because they judged it necessary to give themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word.

Related to the preaching is the administration of the sacraments. The disciples were to baptise the nations *'in the Name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.'* The formal act of incorporation into the body of Christ remains fundamental to the way Christ builds his church. As a gospel ordinance it signifies the priority of grace over faith, union with Christ, regeneration, forgiveness of sins and commitment to a life of discipleship.

Likewise, the importance of the Lord's Supper is signified by the fact that it must be observed until Christ's Second Coming. To outwardly partake of the bread and wine by faith is to receive and feed on Christ and all the benefits of his death, spiritually speaking. Communion in the body and blood of our Lord nourishes, encourages, strengthens and restores all who come in true faith, and depending on the perfection of his one offering for sin. I invariably come to the table with a sense of sin and unworthiness, praying *'God be merciful to me a sinner.'* I leave the table thanking God for blood that avails for the worst of sinners and strengthened to persevere in the service of Christ: *'Lord, if you should mark iniquity, Lord who could stand? But there is mercy with you that you might be feared!'* (Psalm 130:3-4).

I must also mention prayer, the third means of grace. The apostles declared: *'We will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word.'* The one cannot exist without the other? Can the church survive without either? In my last congregation, members would meet for prayer before the morning service to uphold the minister and seek God's blessing on his Word. Those were blessed moments! To move from prayer to pulpit was precious indeed. One of the old Welsh preachers, a man called Daniel Rowland, had a door inserted in the wall of the church behind the pulpit. This was to enable him to come directly from prayer in his house to the service of the Living God. The apostles gave themselves to prayer and preaching and the church continued steadfastly in their teaching, the breaking of bread and the prayers. These are the essential means by which Christ builds his church.

We are under pressure to 'grow' the church. The argument is that as Adam was told to multiply, so the disciples all through Acts were multiplying quickly. It is said that *'when it comes to biblical kingdom-growth, we cannot divide quality from quantity. There is no distinction.'* The logic is defective; so is the eschatology. Growth is in God's hands. The wheat and the weeds grow together until the harvest. In the meantime, you and I have to preach the word, be constant when it is convenient and inconvenient and, out of love for the church which Christ loves, continue making disciples until the end of the age. Because Christ places such a value on his church, it ought to be more precious to us than any other institution, though surrounded by enemies and tested on every hand. Commenting on Psalm 102:3, Calvin writes, *'Let every man, therefore, carefully examine himself on this head. If we do not prefer the church to all other objects of our attentiveness, we are unworthy of being accounted among her members.'*

What kind of church does Christ look for? He showed the aged apostle on the island of Patmos: *'And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.'* (Rev. 21:2) The church is Christ's bride, his building, in which we as ministers are privileged to share. *'According to the grace of God which was given me, as a wise master builder I have laid the foundation and another builds on it. Let each one take care how he builds on it'* (1Cor. 3:10).