

The Conquering Cross

Matthew 16:13-20

At this point in Matthew's gospel, the disciples are beginning to understand who Jesus is. Peter's great confession names Him as the Christ, the Son of the living God. But knowing what this means and what He will do requires more faith. What kind of a savior dies at the hands of His enemies? And what difference will it make? The Father did not send Jesus into our broken world in desperate hope that He just might be able to rescue a few people. No, He sent the Son to save the world and build a church that conquers Hades.

Upon this Rock

Caesarea Philippi is in the very north of Israel, over 100 miles from Jerusalem. Herod the Great built a temple there for Caesar Augustus, and Philip the tetrarch improved and renamed it in honor of himself and Tiberius Caesar. The pagan power of the empire looms there below Mt. Hermon, a beautiful mountain covered with snow most of the year. Jesus and the disciples would sing about it, comparing the blessing of unity descending on God's people like dew of Mount Hermon upon the mountains of Zion (Ps. 133). Jesus comes to this place to ask the disciples: "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" (v. 13). Rumors swirl that Jesus is John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or another prophet, but He wants to know who they say He is (vv. 14-15). Peter makes the great confession: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (v. 16). Jesus calls Peter "Simon Bar-Jonah", which means Simon son of Jonah, and blesses him because though he is just a man (Jonah's kid) and not taught this by any flesh-and-blood human, His Father in heaven revealed it to him (v. 17). Peter calls Jesus the Christ, and Jesus names him *Petros*, rock: "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock (*petra*) I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it" (v. 18). Some Protestants scramble to make the case that Jesus isn't talking about Peter as the rock He will build the church on, but instead upon Peter's profession that Jesus is the Christ. The papacy isn't scriptural, but Peter is obviously the rock even though he's not the only one. The new Jerusalem has twelve foundation stones, each with a name of the twelve apostles (Rev. 21:14). Paul says the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone" (Eph. 2:20). Peter, James, and John will go up the mount with Jesus in a minute (17:1), and to Paul they seemed to be pillars (Gal. 2:9). Among the apostles, Peter speaks early and often, is listed first, and leads in the gospels, but at the Council of Jerusalem in the book of Acts, he speaks for the last time and James presides and pronounces (Acts 15:6-21). Paul dominates for the rest of the book and authors most of the rest of the New Testament. The absence of the papacy in Scripture and the earliest post-apostolic writings change Peter's and the other apostles' confession and foundational role. We stand upon them in faith once for all delivered to the saints, marked by word and sacrament. Scripture exercises authority over the apostles and the church (Acts 17:11).

Keys

Jesus empowers the church by giving her the keys to the kingdom of heaven, the ability to bind and loose on earth and have that work upheld in heaven (v. 19). Keys are used to open and shut, for access and boundaries. The word (Scripture) and sacrament are the two essential (*esse*) marks of the church; without them you don't have a church. Baptism marks our entrance into the covenant people of God, and communion, prepared by the word, is our weekly covenant renewal with Him. It's not that God's covenant gets tired or begins to fade, but sometimes we do, and God wants us in tight fellowship with Him, built up

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and equipped by His word and nourished at His table. The church calls everyone, as Peter did, to “Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is to you and to your children, and to all who are afar off, as many as the Lord our God will call” (Acts 2:38-39). On the basis of the promises given to believing parents and their children, we also baptize babies. But when non-baptized children or adults repent and believe, we baptize them as well, which is what Jesus commanded us to do: “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). Baptism is a mark that doesn’t wash off, a covenant that obligates someone to trust in God for forgiveness and salvation through Christ alone. Our baptisms call us to walk faithfully with Christ and put sin to death (Rom. 6:1-4). Getting baptized doesn’t automatically make you a faithful Christian, but it marks you as a disciple of Jesus and member of His body. Minimally, it makes you a hypocrite, professing faith externally if you lack it internally. The Bible warns us about breaking covenant, professing faith by baptism (or circumcision in the old covenant), but then denying Christ in word and deed (Jn. 15:5-7; Heb. 3:12-17, 6:4-6). So the church binds with baptism. It looses with excommunication, marking those who are no longer believers (Matt. 18:15-20; 1 Cor. 5:1-5). Excommunication purifies the church, and really the only reason someone is ultimately put out is refusing to repent. God loves to show mercy, to forgive, cleanse, restore, sanctify and bless. But when someone will not receive mercy, the church must put him out in hope of bringing him back (1 Cor. 5:5). The prodigal father let his son go and was ready to meet him on the way back and throw a party. Covenant evangelism is where we call people back to Christ.

Gates

Jesus will build His church on Peter and the apostles, and the gates of Hades will not be able to withstand it (v. 18). Gates are points of access and departure where commerce, hospitality, and fortification happen. Solomon says children are like arrows in the hand of a warrior who speak with enemies in the gate (Ps. 127:4-5). The gates Jesus refers to are not the gates of the church. He doesn’t say the doors of the new Jerusalem are fortified, although they are. He’s names the gates of Hades, the city of death where the old way of being human continues. Here people live “who through fear of death [are] all their lifetime subject to bondage” (Heb. 2:15). The church is comprised of the “called-out ones” (*ekklesia*). What are we called out to do? Not to huddle in ghettos waiting for the Lord to come back. The gates of Hades will not prevail against the church because we’re battering them down. Our weapons are not carnal, but rather mighty in God for pulling down strongholds. Word and sacrament, prayer and preaching, loving our neighbor and seeking the welfare of the city, we disciple the nations. Despite what most Christian think will happen in the future, this has already been under way for over two millennia. Jesus commands the disciples not to tell anyone He is the Christ (v. 20). From this point in His ministry He is headed to Jerusalem to die, and His followers so misunderstand the means of accomplishing His mission that He tells them not to emphasize His messiahship. Now we know. God uses the foolish things of the world to confound the wise, and the weak things of world to overcome the mighty. He uses fallible men and women, insignificant local churches, unheard of people and places to overcome the gates of Hades, all because the Son of God took on flesh, lived a sinless life, died on a cross outside Jerusalem, and rose conquering death and hell forever.