

Last week we finished our trip through the book of Colossians. What we saw over and over again was the Apostle Paul giving a clear defense/description/application of the gospel. Part of the reason for this...is because he knew that if you expect the gospel to be and do something else, than you will be sorely disappointed by what it is. Not to insinuate that the gospel is a disappointment, but if you approach the gospel of Jesus Christ, the very wealth of our faith, with the idea that it exists to bring us personal happiness, or that it is a tool to reach our own goals, then it will seem lacking. Paul speaks to this reality in his letter to the church in Corinth:

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1.18).

Same exact gospel, but to one it is folly, to another the power of God. The very things that we hold the most dear...the greatest treasures we have, will look like stupid to those who are not God's people. The truth is, sometimes even the people of God, the very ones He has called out, have a distorted view of the things of God. We come to God expecting from Him something other than what He offers to us. Our expectations not only affect whether or not we appreciate the work of God, but it distorts the very nature of the God that we serve.

In the same way that Paul treats the gospel as a misunderstood gift that needs to be explained, I want to take the idea of the church and view it through the lens of Scripture. Because if there is an aspect of Jesus Christ that is abused to the point of beaten, it would have to be the view of His church. Even that comment may rub some of you here the wrong way. What do you mean part of Jesus Christ? Isn't the church something entirely distinct and separate from the gospel? Not as much as some would have you believe, but that is certainly the popular idea.

In the last month, Youtube exploded with the video of a young spoken word poet who wanted to make clear that Jesus and religion were on opposite ends of the spectrum. The video, which had some very truthful moments, also had some unexpected results. It went from being viewed by no one to over a million people in a week. It perpetuated the view that seems to flow through the current generation, that Jesus produced something pure and undefiled, and that the church is nothing but a man-made institution that seeks to take the teaching of Jesus and exploit them for its own gains. SOUND FAMILIAR?

I have no doubt that there are quite a few in here who have at least some of that lurking in you. I know I do. I certainly had a time in my life when I was ready to

give up on the church, cast it off as a weird way to spend a Sunday morning and a few nights a week. I remember a day not that long ago when I would sit around with my friends who would skewer the whole idea of church as I sat by and said nothing.

But I want to hit it head on today. Because I believe that a proper understanding of where the church came from, what the church exists to do, and how we are supposed to do it will instill in us a greater confidence in who we are, a better appreciation for what we are doing, and more than anything else, it will help us to love our God more, as we understand how the church fits into His greater mission. For the next five weeks we are going to get down and dirty on the church.

Go to amazon and type in 'church' and you will find as more books pointing at the flaws of the church as those who find value in it. We don't like it. It isn't how we would do it. If you start reading books on the church, this is generally what you read.

1. Here's why your idea is stupid
2. Here's why my idea is better

The arguments are many, but they mostly fall into four categories:

Historical: It all started with Constantine...

Missiological: It doesn't work...

Theological: It's just plural for Christian...

Personal: In my experience...

The building of Jesus

The biggest danger of these arguments: HISTORICAL, MISSIONAL, THEOLOGICAL, PERSONAL complaints that people bring up is not that you buy into it hook, line, and sinker, but that you believe it enough, that it undermines your trust of the church. It causes you to always keep one foot out, to hold this much back, to not get yourself too invested,,JUST IN CASE. It's like getting married with a pre-nup. Do you think that just maybe, talking about divorce before you are even married might have an effect on how invested you are. But I'm just protecting myself! FROM WHAT? Don't you see that you are creating a defense against that which you are supposed to be unified to. You are turning an ally into an enemy, before it has done anything to offend you. I know this stuff is out there, and I love you, and Jesus, too much to let it sit.

In Matthew 16, we get a glimpse into the beginning of the church, as Jesus intended it to be. So starting at verse 15:

He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build **my** church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

This is the first time we find the word church (ekklesia) in the Bible. This is Jesus opening up to them a new reality, the idea of a gathering of people, made right by Jesus Himself, who are united by the spirit and connected to one another both spiritually AND physically. Now for the disciples this idea would bring them back to their heritage...Israel...the people of God. In many ways this idea was instilled in them deeply, from the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob). So this idea of a spiritual reality with an earthly presence would not be as difficult a leap for them to make as it is for us. The concept of God's plan unfolding through an established, organized human effort is their history. The bigger idea for them is to take this national identity, this Mosaic ideal, and combine it with the reality of Jesus Christ. Which is why Jesus pushes them:

identity

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This verse flows FROM this conversation of Jesus and Peter. People all over Israel are amazed with this man who speaks powerful words and does powerful things, but they draw different conclusions as to what it all means. Peter's answer reveals his heart. YOU ARE THE CHRIST. Christ, meaning messiah or anointed one. In this Peter is showing that He has been transformed. He has a new identity, a new life. This all came from the fact that the man standing before him was the Son of the Living God!

Jesus blesses him because He knows that Peter is not just trying to give him a right answer. Peter's answer is a confident description of who Jesus is, but also

who Peter is. If Jesus is Christ, than Peter is just a follower...a disciple. As Jesus points out, that change of heart, the submission of yourself to God, can only happen by the work of God. Our flesh and blood wants to vehemently deny our inability and need for Jesus. We want the power, but as we will see, a much greater power flows from giving it up. Jesus goes on:

intimacy

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build **my** church. There is the source of the church...Jesus. I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH. But he also says, I will build it on this Rock. On Peter. For those of you who don't know, this is where the Catholic idea of pope comes from. It stems from the idea that Jesus was specifically designating Peter as the special authority. Each pope is seen as carrying on this special authority by what is called papal succession.

But as usual the context is important. This verse starts with the word AND, meaning the proceeding conversation is important. The conversation where Peter humbly submits Himself to Jesus. So Jesus reply should be seen as a response to a man who has just claimed total trust in Jesus ability to do the work. Peter strips himself down, now Jesus builds him back up. He reminds Peter of his name, a name which means ROCK, the name that Jesus had given him, before he had proven himself...Jesus reveals to Peter that he will play a special role in the building of the church. But this rock will not be him alone as the sole bearer of authority. He would simply be the base. The apostles would be the first generation of the church. VERSION 1.0. They, together, would gather the people of God from around the world and unite them into a single building. **Ephesians 2** paints this picture for us:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit. **Ephesians 2.19-22**

Christ founded the church, and He says I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH. When humans attempt to take that power into their own hands, things go bad. There is a history of that in the church. As Christians, we don't have to pretend like our history is perfect...it is not. It is filled with sinful men and women, who at times have allowed their own desires to usurp their dedication to God. They followed the succession of Peter without also following the heart of Peter.

But I also want to point out that Jesus never expected it to go perfectly. He understands sin as well as anyone else. As he told the apostles that the church would be on their shoulders, he knew who He was talking to. He had been correcting their mistakes for the last three years. But even with all the baggage, he still doesn't waiver in proclaiming I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH. But what about when things look bad? I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH. What about when leaders fail? I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH. What about my experiences? I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH.

When Jesus builds, there is power! He says:

invincibility

and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

The gospel is about victory. Jesus Christ dying on the cross took upon Himself the wrath of God, the punishment for our sin, to conquer the slavery that would otherwise control us. He rose three days later to show His power over death. He had victory, and the mind-blowing part is that He shares this victory with you. No matter what you are going through, no matter what you have done, no matter how constrained and defeated you feel, Jesus Christ offers to share with you the victory that He earned. We are promised that we will be attacked. He promises us that as followers of Him we will suffer. But He also promises that we will win.

This isn't just an individual promise...He promises this to the church. He tells the church that He will not let her shortcomings, her weaknesses, her mistakes be her defining characteristic. What makes the church powerful is the fact that it is His. It is nothing about the church that makes it special. It will prevail because Jesus is in control of it.

The church is called the Bride of Christ. It is not just something distinct from Him that does nothing but mess up what he said like a bad game of telephone. Instead, we see in Ephesians 5, that Jesus makes her

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. **Ephesians 5.25-27**

What we are talking about here is God's sovereignty. He is in control of all things. Even when the church messes up, He is there. The last part of the great

commission, as He is sending out His disciples on mission, He promises them I will be with you always, to the end of the age. This isn't just, I will watch you mess up, or even worse, I will look down on you begrudgingly as you fail to be my church, but I will be with you, guiding your steps, granting you power, keeping all things in control.

We must be careful not to judge simply by what we see. If Jesus is building His church, then we can be confident that it will succeed. This isn't an excuse to mess up, but it is an important distinction when we start thinking about how great we are. And the question on church changes. It goes from, how can we make this work better, to how can we faithfully live out our part as the church? To understand that, we need to know what it is Jesus is building. He goes on:

authority

I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Jesus has said He would build His church, He told the apostles that they would be the beginning of it, he has promised that His church will prevail, and now he lays out what the purpose of the church will be.

Jesus has given them the keys, the way into the kingdom. It is Himself. He calls Himself the way the truth and the life. Access to heaven comes only through the cross. They now have the keys, the truth that will set men free. That truth brings with it responsibility.

The binding and loosing here refers to declaring men bound to sin, or free from sin in Christ. So as the carriers of the Truth, as those entrusted with the word, the Apostles had been made responsible for the health of the church. They were responsible to bind, to call out sin, to reveal false truth. They were also tasked with declaring freedom, the grace of God.

They have been given the authority of the church by nature of the fact that they were the ones who HAD THE WORD OF GOD. And when Jesus sends them out to launch His church, he tells them: to make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father Son and Holy Spirit, teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you.

You have the keys to bring them in, to baptize them and make them part of the church. You are then to bind and loose, teaching them all that I have

commanded, so that the Body of Jesus Christ, the Church, lives like the Head it is connected to. As **Ephesians 4** describes it:

Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

WHAT'S THE POINT?

Up to this point I have thrown a bunch out there, and now I am going to attempt to tie together the many ends that I have created. So If we go back to where we started, we started with four basic arguments, or hesitations about the church, and I want to end by answering them in light of what we see here in Matthew 16.

First, the HISTORICAL. The idea that the church is an institution that looks nothing like what Jesus planned and is nothing but a human creation. Man-made religion certainly exists. Churches are full of sinful people and sinful people sin. But we can also see that the church as an earthly presence was first instituted by Jesus Christ Himself. It was the men that He personally trained and gave authority to that established the first local, institutional churches. They appointed elders. They called out false teachers. They As we get a glimpse into the established early church in Acts 2:

they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.

So they were an organized group that focused gathered together to focus on teaching, taking communion, and prayer. That almost sounds like what we do. So be careful believing this idea that church is some man-made custom, barely recognizable to Jesus. The idea that we are the first generation who is going to cast off tradition to go back 2000 years to purity, happens every generation. Just ask the Jesus People.

Second, the MISSIOLOGICAL. This is the argument that the church is not working. The general consensus is that the church better change or IT WILL DIE. That there is something wrong with it that we can remedy by reinventing it, as revolutionaries, creating a new kind of church, an organic church, to name a few popular titles.

All of this presupposes that we understand what God is doing better than He does. That we understand what the church is meant to accomplish AND SO, can speak into how it should get there. In the end, this view of the church is built on the false assumption that the church that looks how we want it to look would be a successful church. We must be careful not to expect from God that which He never promised us.

But the truth IS, the church exists to help people know God better and rely on Him more fully. And if that is the case, than the whole act of living our lives, especially church, is to bring us to the end of ourselves and to the foot of the cross. To help us to understand how hopeless and broken we are. No better way to do that than to try to work together with a group of other sinners.

Third, the THEOLOGICAL. This is the idea that when the Bible says church it is talking about the people of God, throughout time and space. So all believers, always. And this argument is, true. The Bible does refer to the Universal church, the church as only God sees it. The problem with this argument, as it is usually used, is it recognizes the invisible church to the neglect of the local church. In Matthew 16, that we looked at today, Jesus was speaking of His church in the big C, universal way. Why? Because no local churches existed yet. But throughout the rest of the NT, the majority of the time that church was addressed, it was speaking of a specific gathering in a specific place.

By nature of being a believer, you are part of the invisible church, but that is not a license to reject the gathering together. We gather together for the purpose of encouraging and supporting one another in our daily walk, to worship God together as a unified voice, and to practice the distinctives of the church: sacraments and discipline. This isn't just a show, because if it is it's a bad one. This is how Jesus has called us to be and how He has promised us, He will work through us.

Last, the PERSONAL. This is the argument that you are most convinced of because you have experienced it. You went to a church and they were mean. You got hurt. Maybe it was even by the leadership. The last thing I would try to do is convince you that your pain is not real, or that this church would never do that to you.

Instead I pray that you take a different view of the church. Rather than thinking about this group of people as a mass who is supposed to provide you with something: be it knowledge, social connections, a husband or wife, or some emotional moment. Put that all aside and recognize that the Body of Christ is

brought together so that it may be sanctified. Made less like itself and more like Him. That can happen when times are good, but it seems to happen that much more readily through pain. I am not saying we don't work toward unity and love, I am just asking that you don't make other people's sin the eject button on your time in church.

I'll close with this. The church is referred to as Jesus' building, His bride and His body. I pray that as you reflect on this church, you view it through the lens of the builder, the groom, and the head of the church. If you do, many of these discouraging thoughts that come up inside our heads can be replaced by the truth. And the truth will set you free.