



## IS THE GROUND SOLID UNDER US? THE FOUNDATION OF THE CHURCH

Psalm 46:1-11; Matthew 16:13-20; 1 Corinthians 15:20-27

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**April 13, 2008**

We all know some church buildings that are no longer used as churches. They have undergone some drastic changes. I know some church buildings that were turned into a beauty shop, a community center, a house for a family, a warehouse, and I ate in one that had been turned into a restaurant. You may know of other changes.

Steve Taylor has written a song entitled, “This Disco Used to be a Cute Cathedral.” The song goes like this:

Sell your holy habitats  
That ship’s been deserted by sinking rats  
The exclusive place to go  
Is where the pious pogo  
Don’t you know.

This disco used to a cute cathedral  
Where the chosen cha-cha every day of the year  
This disco used to be a cute cathedral  
Where we only play the stuff you’re wanting to hear.

The church has received a great deal of challenge in its history. Voices from persons like Santayana have declared that “the shell of Christendom is broken.” Swinburne, the poet, wrote that he had great admiration for Christ but despised his “leprous bride- the church.” Bertrand Russell, the agnostic, once wrote: “I say quite deliberately that the Christian religion as organized in the churches has been and still is the principal enemy of moral progress in the world.”

The church has indeed received a great deal of criticism from its enemies, but it has also had sharp criticism directed at it from its own friends—church leaders and theologians. I have a number of books on my shelves about the church. The titles of these books note some of the problems with today’s church: *God’s Frozen People*, *The Empty Pulpit*, *The Comfortable Pew*, *The Suburban Captivity of the Church*, *The Noise of Solemn Assembly*, *The Portrait of the Church: Warts and All*, *How the Church Can Minister to the World Without Losing Its Soul*, *The Last Days of the Church*, and *The Church of the*

*Perfect Storm.* The church has always had to struggle to be church. In every age of the church's existence, it has struggled with the threat of the secularization of the church. The tendency is to try to mold the church into the image of society and lose sight of what Jesus intended for the church to be.

### **What Is the Church?**

When someone asks, "What is the church?" all kinds of images come to mind. The average person might respond to the question, "What is the church?" by saying: "Well, I drive by the church on my way to work every day on Hillsborough Street or Salisbury Street or when I go downtown." Others think about the church in terms of whom the pastor is. "That is Dr. So and So's church." Some might imply that "this church is John Smith's church." They link the church with some deacon who may have been a member for years. Others say, "Let's go to church." They are talking about a building. But is the church simply a building? For two years when I was pastor of St. Matthews Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, we did not have a building. Were we no longer a church when we did not have a building? That cannot be the case.

There are others who see the church as a sort of morality club. We gather occasionally, for some it is less occasionally than for others, to hear some moral talks about how we are supposed to live and what we ought to think to live correctly. From this morality club, we receive some values that we may use in our lives. Others see the church as a private club. It is for people who think alike, look alike, and act alike. These people are usually from the same socio or economic background. There are others who see the church as a social agency. They want the church to be concerned with all of the problems of society and find some remedy for them. There are others who see the church basically as a sort of theater; a place where there is music and other things that entertain. A person comes to sit and listen to a speaker, who, hopefully, will make one want to listen. They see themselves as an audience and nothing more.

### **The New Testament Church**

Well, you think about it for a moment. Are any of these images really the church that Jesus Christ was talking about? Are they really the New Testament church? The New Testament uses numerous images for the church. Among these images are the Bride of Christ, the body of Christ, the household of faith, the family of Jehovah, the seed and shrine of the Eternal, salt, light, leaven, the vine, the temple, or the building. Paul Minear, a New Testament scholar, found more than ninety-six different images of the church in the New Testament. Among this list one finds saints, disciples, believers, faithful, slaves and servant people of God, household, family, the new Exodus and the new humanity. He says that "the New Testament

idea of the church is not so much a technical doctrine as a gallery of pictures.” There is not just one picture, but many.

Let’s stop for a moment and go back to the first mention we have of the church in the New Testament. That reference is found in our text for today from the Gospel of Matthew, the sixteenth chapter. The Greek word for church, “ecclesia” (Matt. 16:18), is a word which translated means “the called out ones.” The church was not so much an organization but an organism—a living group of peoples who came out from society to follow Christ. Many scholars and theologians do not believe that Jesus intended to form any kind of organization. But the other side of this question has to be raised. “Can you have any idea or ideal without some kind of organizational form of the ideal image?” The church grew out of a group of disciples who had committed themselves to Jesus Christ and, who, following Christ’s resurrection, had a radical experience of faith that transformed them so fully that they began to live for him and bear witness to him.

### **Jesus Asked His Disciples about his Identity**

Let’s look for a moment at this passage from the sixteenth chapter of Matthew where Jesus paused at Caesarea Philippi and asked his disciples, “Who do men and women say that I am?” About twenty years ago I had the opportunity to stand at the place or somewhere in the region where Jesus asked his disciples this question. A deep cave is there where archaeologists have uncovered some of the images that were used in the worship of the god Pan, the god of nature. In this same area there were supposed to be fourteen temples of Baal where the Syrians worshiped their god. This area was supposed to be the source of the River Jordan which had such a significant place in the life of the nation Israel.

At this sacred place, Jesus turned to his disciples and asks, “Who are people saying I am?” Can you imagine what his disciples must have thought? “He has heard some rumors, hasn’t he?” “Some are saying that he is unclean, because he has touched the blind, deaf, lame and lepers.” “He has heard the rumors that some are saying that he is a sinner because he eats with sinners and has gone into their homes.” “He has heard the rumors from others who questioned his right to heal, because he has no doctor’s degree from Jerusalem nor does he belong to the medical society of Galilee.” Others are asking, “What are your credentials to preach? You are not in the Who’s Who in Religion of Galilee. You haven’t graduated from the seminary at Jerusalem. Where is your certificate of ordination? Who are you to be preaching?” “He has heard the rumors,” they thought. They may have thought about all that criticism, but they say respectfully, none of those things. Instead they reply: “Some say you may be Jeremiah, Elijah, or John the Baptist returned from the dead.” All of these were nice folks, prophets and forerunners of the Messiah.

Then Jesus asked the question that fell like a silver dollar dropped on a slate floor which has echoed down through the centuries and continues to echo in the lives of persons today: “Who do You say that I am?” That is the crucial question. “Who do YOU say that I am?” There have been all kinds of answers to that question through the years. Some of them have been almost ludicrous and others heretical. Then Simon Peter, whether responding just for himself or for the whole group of disciples, confesses, “You are the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God.” And what a response that was!

### **Christ Is the Foundation of the Church**

Look with me briefly at some of the key points in our text for today. We begin first with the acknowledgment that Jesus Christ is himself the foundation of the church. He is the foundation. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:11: “For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.” Jesus says: “I will build my church.” “I will build.” Jesus Christ is the foundation stone. In Ephesians, Paul writes about Jesus as “the chief cornerstone” of the church (Eph.3:20). When asked for a sign of his authority, Jesus used an interesting image. “Destroy this temple,”—and he wasn’t talking about the physical Jewish temple but he was speaking about himself—“and in three days I will raise it up” (John 2:19). The Jews misunderstood Jesus and thought he was speaking about the temple in Jerusalem. But John declares that Jesus was speaking not about a building made of stone but his own body which his enemies would destroy but would be raised on the third day (John 2:21C22). John had said earlier, “The Word became flesh and ‘tabernacled’ among us” (John 1:14). His body was the new temple. He was to incorporate the new Israel, the new humanity. He is the foundation of the church.

In Corinthians 15:20:27 Paul underscores that the risen Lord is the foundation of the church. “If Christ be not raised, then our faith is in vain,” Paul said. But Christ is risen (I Car. 15:15C17). Jesus Christ is himself the foundation of the church. All else is sinking sand.

### **The Church Is Christ’s Possession**

Secondly, the church is Christ’s possession. The Church belongs to its Lord. Jesus said, “I will build *my* church.” The church is never yours or mine. The church is always under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Christ is Lord or it is not church. Wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the church. If Jesus Christ is not present, it doesn’t make any difference what kind of building, programs, preachers, choirs or anything else we may have, it is not the church.

I heard about a business meeting in another church where I was not pastor, thank goodness! The church was likely engaged in an argument about what color the

carpet was going to be, what section of the church would be covered or on which side of the church the piano went. Finally one deacon rose up in anger and exclaimed; “I don’t care what the Christian thing is. This is what I want!” Do you hear that? We get so much of that in church. “I don’t care what the Christian thing is to do or what Christ wants. I want my way.” Instead of searching the Scriptures to know the mind of Christ, we want our way.

### **The Importance of Faith Commitment**

Thirdly, the church is built on the confession of believers. In this story in Matthew’s Gospel, we read about Peter’s confession of faith. Peter made a confession of faith in his recognition that Jesus was the Christ. Peter’s confession has been a storm-center of the Church down through the ages. Catholics and Protestants have usually been on opposite sides. Some have tried to solve the problem by referring to the Greek language and noting a play on words in the Greek name for Peter and the Greek word for rock which are very similar. This view attempts to place the emphasis on Peter’s faith and not on Peter. But Jesus didn’t speak Greek, he spoke Aramaic. In Aramaic the word for Peter and rock are the same word.

What was Jesus saying when he stated: “You are Peter and upon you I will build by Church?” The Church is built on the confession of Peter. He was the first stone which was built on the foundation stone—Jesus Christ. He was the first to recognize that Jesus Christ was Lord. He became the first stone in the Church. The apostles became the other stones in the foundation of the Church by their confession of faith. All other Christians, through their confessions down through the years have become a part of the foundation of the Church. The Church was built on Peter’s confession, the disciples’ confession and your confession and on mine. The Church was built on each of them and each of us. It is your confession and the confession of other disciples that are a part of the “body” of Christ’s church. It is the confession of every Christian down through the ages that makes up the church. All of us are a part of this body.

Jesus was not just the founder of a religion. He is its foundation. He is its source. “I, if I be lifted up,” Jesus declared. “I will draw all men (and women) unto me.” “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father but by me.” Jesus did not ask his followers, “Do you believe in God?” or “Do you think the Beatitudes are correct?” No! He put himself at the center of his message. “Come unto me.” “Follow me.” “Believe me.” “Learn of me.” “Preach in my name.”

“Who do you say that I am?” The New Testament rings with the words that men said about him and claims Jesus made for himself. He is the Son of David, Son of God, Son of man, Messiah, the Servant of God, the Good Shepherd, the Divine Physician, the Savior, the Prophet, King, the Stone, Bridegroom, the Bread of Life,

the Light of the World, the Door, the Vine, the Way, the Truth, the Life, the Resurrection and the Life, the Judge, the Lamb, the Scapegoat, the High Priest, the Just One, the Amen, the Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and End, the Head, the Image, the Christ of Creation, the Firstborn of Creation, the Bright and Morning Star, and others.

You can't be Christian and not be related to Jesus Christ. There has to be the confession that Jesus is Lord. This is the central foundation stone in the church for the believer. Oh, I know that we are sometimes criticized in the church because we refer so often to Jesus. This reminds me about the small boy whose Sunday School teacher asked her class one Sunday: "What is it that climbs a tree, is furry, and has a bushy tail?" The little boy looked up and said, "Because I am in Sunday School I know I should say Jesus. But it really sounds like a squirrel to me." I know we struggle with that concern sometimes in church. But, dear friends, Jesus Christ is our basic confession of faith. Confession in Christ is the foundation for bringing believers together, or we are not church.

### **The Church's Foundation Is Secure**

Fourthly, we find that the foundation of the church is secure, because it is on solid ground. Jesus said, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it." The gates of Hades were a very familiar metaphor to the Jewish people. They were symbolic of the forces of evil and the powers of death. Jesus knew that his disciples would go through misunderstanding, rejection, and persecution. The followers of Jesus Christ have always had to withstand persecutions and rejections. Many have thought they could stamp out the Church. Others have seen the Church as so inept that they thought it could not survive. The Church was seen by many as being so corrupt in the fifteenth century that there seemed to be no possibility for survival. But then, Martin Luther came on the scene, and the Church was reformed. There were many who thought that the Church in England in the nineteenth century was dead, and Wesley began to preach and the Church was transformed. Many Christians thought that the Church would never be missionary minded again, but then along came William Carey, and there was a rebirth in the Church. The scandals of Pedophilia in the Roman Catholic Church and the sex scandals in many Protestant churches have many wondering about the church today. Who will come along and give guidance through this wilderness?

God is constantly coming into the life of his people and breathing new life into the Church. There are those in our own day who are frightened that the church is going to be swallowed up in secularism or caught up in a mentality that will totally distort it. But thank goodness there are voices who are willing to stand up and challenge these modern corruptions and say, "This is not the authentic church." Let's

hear again what Jesus said his Church would be and not buy any distortion of it.

### **A Commission to Serve**

Then we receive, in the fifth place, a commission from Jesus. Jesus said to Peter, "I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." That phrase has caused a lot of misunderstanding in the Church. What is Jesus telling him? He is saying: "You are to be a steward in my kingdom." A steward is someone who manages and administers the affairs of someone else, "The keys to the success of my kingdom's work are in your hands. I will be leaving soon, Peter, you are responsible for sharing my love and grace with others. Whether or not it is successful is in your hands. You are my steward. Carry on my gospel and pass the good news onto others. It is up to you." This seems to be the basic emphasis here. The keys were passed to Peter, the other disciples and to every believer through the centuries.

First Baptist Church is at a crossroads. We can be grateful for our past and build on it and move forward or we can look back and say, "The good old days are gone forever." We can be nostalgic and wish we were like we were in the 50's or 60's, the 80's 90's or the first part of the 2000's or we can dream about our possibilities for the future,

our new pastor,  
our new shapes and ministries,  
our new goals to share Christ with a new age  
and not try to confine our message to the image  
of what some call the good old days.

Instead we can help construct the church toward the good new days. Let us not be frightened by the future, but be aware that Christ always goes before us.

Our church has many strengths:

a rich history and heritage,  
an attractive place of worship,  
a good, functional building,  
a strong, dedicated ministerial staff,  
a variety of gifts in our laypersons,  
a strong sense of mission,  
wonderful ministries and programs,  
good financial resources,  
a thinking congregation with openness to new insights,  
committed to women/men in ministry,  
and many more

Let's build on our strengths. Let's light torches for the future and walk in

their light.

Now it is up to you and to me to carry the message to others. The “keys to the kingdom” have been passed down through the centuries by others until they have reached you, and now they are in your hands. Have you ever been house hunting and finally came upon a house that you wanted to see? You may have walked up the steps and discovered a sign in the window: “Key next door.” You, then, had to go next door to get the key to get in. There are a lot of Christians who want to pass the key next door. But the key is in your hands and in my hands. We are stewards of the Gospel of Christ. We who have received so much are now challenged and commissioned to share this love with other people. Friends, if you and I have been called to be a part of the Church of Christ, he has placed a key in the hand of every single one of us to share the good news of Christ with others. That is our commission.

### **A Brief Summary**

If I could summarize what I think are the biblical concepts of church, I would list these characteristics in six summary statements. First, the church came into existence as God’s gift and not by human achievement. Second, the church is not a physical institution but a fellowship of believers. Third, the church by its nature as body is not individual but corporate. When we are only concerned about our own individual wants in church, we miss the point. The church is the body-- corporate. We have to be concerned about the whole church. Faith is never private. It is personal, but not private. Fourth, the church is not limited to a local congregation but is universal. Fifth, the church is not the depository of some wonderful memory about Christ but is the place where the living Lord dwells. Sixth, the church does not exist for its own sake but for the glory of God. Whenever the church becomes so concerned about its own perpetuation, it loses sight of what it was created to be as church.

Several years ago at Actor’s Theater in Louisville, Kentucky, I saw a play entitled *To Culebra*, about Ferdinand Delesseps, who directed the construction of the Suez Canal and, in his later years planned the construction of the Panama Canal. His company went bankrupt trying to dig the canal. One day he was talking to his son about his work, “You must always remember,” he said, “that the pessimists are the spectators of life.”

Many people become discouraged easily and turn away from their goals. Negative and critical attitudes cast discouragement in the paths of others. Anybody can throw stumbling blocks in another’s path. What stepping stones do you provide? Anybody can throw obstacles in the way. What helping hands do you extend? When we make the faith attractive, we draw men and women to Christ.

A man, who recently joined a church, said: “I haven’t been this excited about a church for years.” When we are excited about the faith and our church’s ministry in spreading the gospel, we will share this experience with others.

If we do not make the faith attractive to others, especially in church, who will be drawn to the church? Then we are so content individualistically on having “my” way and not on what is best for the Church, how sad is our understanding of church. My prayer is that whoever joins our fellowship will grow in the faith and not be hindered by our fellowship but strengthened and encouraged. Let’s seek to make this Christ’s Church. Remember that the Church is never Bill Tuck’s church, John Lewis’s or Dan Day’s church nor your church. It is Christ’s church! Will you affirm that?

*O God, we thank You for the church and for Your Love for the church, so much that You died for it. Lord, we know that we are often far from what You would save us be. Give us the courage, conviction, and faith to be what You would have us be as Church. Through Christ we pray. Amen.*

<sup>1</sup>Paul Minear, *Images of the Church in The New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

#### PASTORAL PRAYER

O God of love and grace, here we are in church again. Some of us have come to this place from habit, some from the expectations of others, and some out of curiosity. Many of us have not really met You before or some have only known You in a secondhand way. We pray that You will surprise us now with Your presence. May our lives come alive with the power of this meeting with You. May our beings pulsate with Your radiance; fill the emptiness of our souls with the fullness of Your presence. Stir our memories with remembrances of Your love in the past and assurance of that love in the future.

Shake us loose from the shackles of sinfulness which bind us to wrong turns of old habits, twisted dreams, false images and wrong goals. Challenge us with a faith that is vibrant with meaning and open us to the continuous coming of Your spirit. Make us receptive to Your grace, to the correction of Your standards. May we be controlled by Your power and motivated by Your love.

*We bring to You the burdens and joys, the hopes and dreams of our congregation with the assurance that You are near us to sustain us and carry us through. Touch us now with Your presence and make our worship real. Make our senses come alive. May our hope and dedication be rekindled, as we come through Jesus Christ our living Lord. Amen.*