

# A Biblical Study of the Church

## Millersville Bible Church

Key text: "I will build my Church"

Matthew 16:13-19

13. "When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is? 14. They replied, 'Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' 15. 'But what about you?' He asked. 'Who do you say I am?'

16. Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'

17. Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.

18. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.'

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

### Five key words

#### Observations:

I

Will

Build

My

Church

## Note from D. A. Carson

The objection that Peter considers Jesus the rock is insubstantial because metaphors are commonly used variously, till they become stereotyped, and sometimes even then. Here Jesus builds his church; in 1 Corinthians 3:10, Paul is "an expert builder." In 1 Corinthians 3:11, Jesus is the church's foundation; in Ephesians 2:19-20, the apostles and prophets are the foundation (cf. also Rev 21:14), and Jesus is the "cornerstone." Here Peter has the keys; in Revelation 1:18; 3:7, Jesus has the keys. In John 9:5, Jesus is "the light of the world"; in Matthew 5:14, his disciples are. None of these pairs threatens Jesus' uniqueness. They simply show how metaphors must be interpreted primarily with reference to their immediate contexts.

The text says nothing about Peter's successors, infallibility, or exclusive authority. These late interpretations entail insuperable exegetical and historical problems--e.g., after Peter's death, his "successor" would have authority over a surviving apostle, John. What the NT does show is that Peter is the first to make this formal confession and that his prominence continues in the earliest years of the church (Acts 1-12). But he, along with John, can be sent by other apostles (Acts 8:14); and he is held accountable for his actions by the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:1-18) and rebuked by Paul (Gal 2:11-14). He is, in short, *primus inter pares* ("first among equals"); and on the foundation of such men (Eph 2:20), Jesus built his church.

*Ekklesia* ("church") occurs only here and at 18:17 in the Gospels. Etymologically it springs from the verb *ekkaleo* ("call out from") and refers to those who are "called out"; but usage is far more important than etymology in determining meaning. In the NT *ekklesia* can refer to assemblies of people in a nonreligious setting (Acts 19:39); and once it refers to God's OT people, the "church" in the desert at the giving of the law (Acts 7:38; of Heb 2:12). But in Acts and in the Epistles it usually refers to Christian congregations or to all God's people redeemed by Christ.

Thus *ekklesia* ("church") is entirely appropriate in Matthew 16:18; 18:17, where there is no emphasis on institution, organization, form of worship, or separate synagogue. Even the idea of "building" a people springs from the OT (Ruth 4:11; 2Sam 7:13-14; 1 Chronicles 17:12-13; Pss 28:5; 118:22; Jer 1:10; 24:6; 31:4; 33:7; Amos 9:11). "Jesus' announcement of his purpose to build his *ekklesia* suggests ... that the fellowship established by Jesus stands in direct continuity with the Old Testament Israel" (Ladd, NT *Theology*, p. 110), construed as the faithful remnant with the eyes of faith to come to terms with the new revelation. Acknowledged as Messiah, Jesus responds that he will build his *ekklesia*, his people, his church--which is classic messianism. "A Messiah without a Messianic Community would have been unthinkable to any Jew" (Albright and Mann).

Jesus' "church" is not the same as his "kingdom" (contra Hill, *Matthew*): the two words belong to different concepts, the one to "people" and the other to "rule" or "reign" (see on 13:28-30, 36-43). But neither must they be opposed to each other, as if both cannot occupy the same place in time (contra Walvoord). The messianic reign is calling out the messianic people. The kingdom has been inaugurated; the people are being gathered. So far as the kingdom has been inaugurated in advance of its consummation, so far also is Jesus' church an outpost in history of the final

eschatological community. "The implication is inescapable that, in the establishment of the church, there was to be a manifestation of the kingdom or rule of God" (Stonehouse, *Witness of Matthew*, p. 235). When the kingdom is consummated, then Messiah's "assembly" shall also attain the richest blessings Messiah's reign can give. Nothing, therefore, can eliminate Messiah's church or prevent it from reaching that consummation.

*"The gates of Hades will not overcome it"* RSV: "The powers of death shall not prevail against it."

..... "gates of Hades" or very similar expressions are found in canonical literature (Job 17:16; 38:17; Pss 9:13; 107:18; Isa 38:10), noncanonical Jewish literature (Wisdom 16:13; 3Macc 5:51; Pss Sol 16:2), and pagan literature (Homer *Iliad* 9. 312; *Odyssey* 11.277; Aeschylus *Agam.* 1291; Euripedes *Hecuba* 1), and seem to refer to death and dying.

**19** *I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven:* As in v. 18, the promise goes beyond the days of Jesus' earthly ministry. What Jesus' disciples thought this meant at the time is uncertain. Perhaps they hoped that when Jesus established his earthly reign and defeated the Romans, they would hold major posts under his reign (cf. Bonnard). In the postresurrection period, the nature of this inaugurated kingdom became progressively clearer.

But we cannot go on without understanding the binding and loosing (v. 19b) to which the keys are related.

*whatever you bind ... loosed in heaven ...*

But exactly what is meant by this "binding and loosing" of persons, and is it absolute? And how is it related to the power of the keys? Substantial help comes from comparing Jesus' denunciation of the teachers of the law in Luke 11:52. There they are told that they "have taken away the key to knowledge" and have not only failed to enter [the kingdom] themselves but have "hindered those who were entering." Clearly, then, by their approach to the Scriptures, Jesus save they are making it impossible for those who fall under the malign influences of their teaching to accept the new revelation in Jesus and enter the kingdom. They take away "the key to knowledge."

In contrast, Peter, on confessing Jesus as Messiah, is told he has received this confession by the Father's revelation and will be given the keys of the kingdom: i.e., by proclaiming "the good news of the kingdom" (4:23), which, by revelation he is increasingly understanding, he will open the kingdom to many and shut it against many. Fulfillments of this in Acts are not found in passages like 15:10 but in those like 2:14-39; 3:11-26, so that by this means the Lord added to the church those who were being saved (2:45), or, otherwise put, Jesus was building his church (Matt 16:18). But the same gospel proclamation alienates and excludes men; so we also find Peter shutting up the kingdom from men (Acts 4:11-12; 8:20-23). The periphrastic future perfects are then perfectly natural: Peter accomplishes this binding and loosing by proclaiming a gospel that has already been given and by making personal application on that basis (Simon Magus). Whatever he binds or looses will have been bound or loosed, so long as he adheres to that divinely disclosed gospel. He has no direct pipeline to heaven, still less do his decisions force heaven to comply; but he may be authoritative in binding and loosing because heaven has acted

first (cf. Acts 18:9-10). Those he ushers in or excludes have already been bound or loosed by God according to the gospel already revealed and which Peter, by confessing Jesus as the Messiah) has most clearly grasped.

Does this promise apply to Peter only, to the apostolic band, or to the church at large? The interpretation given so far broadly fits a major theme of Matthew's Gospel: the disciples were called to be fishers of men (4:19), to be salt (5:13) and light (5:14-16), to preach the good news of the kingdom (10:6-42), and, after the Resurrection, to disciple the nations and teach them all that Jesus commanded (28:18-20). Within this framework Matthew 16:18-19 fits very well. Unlike the messianic kingdom expected by so many Jews, which would come climactically without any agreement or action taken by men, Jesus announces something different. In full Christian perspective the kingdom will be consummated in sudden, apocalyptic fashion at the Parousia, when God's actions are final and quite independent of human means. But now the keys of the kingdom are confided to men. They must proclaim the Good News, forbid entrance, urge conversion. They constitute a small minority in a big world; their mission will be to function as the eschatological *ekklesia*, the people of God Jesus is building within this world. Inevitably the assignment involves them in using the keys to bind and lose.

Understanding the text thus largely answers the question as to how far the promise applies; for the focus is no longer on the individual and what he does or does not represent but on his place in salvation-history. In one sense Peter stands with the other disciples as fishers of men, as recipients of the Great Commission (notice in v. 20 that Jesus warns *all* his disciples, not just Peter, to tell no one). In that sense the disciples stand as paradigms for all believers during this period of redemptive history. But this does not exclude a special role for Peter or the apostles (see on v. 18). Peter was the foundation, the first stone laid: he enjoys this "salvation historical primacy," and on him others are laid. This results in certain special roles in the earliest years of the Christian church. But notions of hierarchy or sacerdotalism are simply irrelevant to the text.

Confirmation that this is the way 16:19 is to be taken comes at 18:18. If the church, Messiah's eschatological people already gathered now, has to exercise the ministry of the keys, if it must bind and loose, then clearly one aspect of that will be the discipline of those who profess to constitute it. Thus tie two passages are tightly joined: 18:18 is a special application of 16:19. Again, if we may judge from Paul's ministry, this discipline is a special function of apostles, but also of elders and even of the whole church (1Cor 5:1-13; 2Cor 13:10; Titus 2:15; 3:10-11)--an inescapable part of following Jesus during this age of the inaugurated kingdom and of the proleptic gathering of Messiah's people. The church of Jesus the Christ is more than an audience. It is a group with confessional standards, one of which (viz., "Jesus is the Christ") here precipitates Jesus' remarks regarding the keys. The continuity of the church depends as much on discipline as on truth. Indeed, faithful promulgation of the latter both entails and presupposes the former.

It appears, then, that the text is not interested in whether Peter's (or the church's) decisions are infallible. Its concern is with the role Jesus' disciples must play within this new phase of redemptive history. To press the "whatever" absolutely not only misunderstands the context but

fails to reckon with Jesus' tendency to use absolutist language even when he cannot possibly mean to be taken that way (see on 5:33-37).

Thus Jesus' disciples, in accordance with his gospel of the kingdom, take up the ministry of the keys and bind and loose on earth what has with the coming of the kingdom been bound and loosed in heaven. The thought is akin to, though more comprehensive than, Acts 18:9-10.