

Theme: Christ's Prediction of the Victory of His War-Church

Preface:

Throughout most of the last century evangelical Christians have been dominated by pessimistic views of the future of the church. The most popular study Bible through most of that century taught Christians to expect the apostasy of the professing church. That study Bible was born of a movement that taught Bible-believing Christians to leave their churches, gather in small fellowships, and wait for the Lord's return. It was an axiom of its system of thought that every Dispensation ends in failure—including the Dispensation of the Church. The direct tendency of such views was to kill all enterprising zeal for the church. Why polish brass on a sinking ship?

Such views are nothing less than astonishing in light of the Lord's actual teaching. I want to point you to a text in this hour that shows how starkly and amazingly our Lord's teaching contrasts with such views. That text is Matthew 16:18. Please turn there and follow while I read that text. [Read.] I have entitled this text and my message: ***Christ's Prediction of the Victory of His War-Church.***

Introduction:

I want to explain the significance of this wonderful prediction under three headings today.

- I. Its Premises*
- II. Its Promises*
- III. Its Purposes*

I. Its Premises

It is not my purpose to provide a through exposition of the passage in which my text occurs. I do need to tell you briefly what I believe the answers are to two questions. I need to do this because unless I answer these questions you may be distracted from what I am saying about the text. I need to answer these questions also because you will not appreciate, I fear, the application of Christ's prediction to you without these answers.

A. In what sense is Peter said to be the rock of the church?

Roman Catholicism never tires of quoting this passage to prove that the Pope of Rome is somehow the vicar of Christ on earth and the head of His church. This use of the text, however, assumes three things which are utterly without biblical basis.

- This use of the text assumes that Peter had successors who inherited his position as the rock of the church. Peter, however, was an apostle and had no such successors. The Apostles of Christ were the foundation of the church, and no such Apostles live on earth after the generation that founded the church.
- Rome's use of the text also assumes that the successors of Peter are those who later styled themselves the bishops of Rome. The Bible never says anything like this. There is zero biblical evidence for the idea that the bishops of Rome were the successors of Peter.
- This claim, furthermore, assumes that there are such things as bishops in the sense that Rome means. Bishops, in the sense that Rome believes in bishops, hold an office superior to that of elders or pastors and as such rule one or more churches as spiritual monarchs. This belief in an office of bishop distinct from that of pastor or elder is entirely contrary to the teaching of God's Word.

But, then, in what sense is Peter said in our text to be the rock of the church? The short answer is simply this. He is said to be the rock of the church—not individually or personally, but confessionally and apostolically. Let me explain.

He is said to be the rock of the church confessionally. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit he had just confessed that truth which is the ground, basis, or foundation of Christ's church—the truth that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God (Matt. 16:16). This foundation of Christ's church is re-stated in 1 Corinthians 3:11: *For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.* It is not because of his personal piety, but because of public confession, that he is called the rock of the church.

He is said to be the rock apostolically. Jesus committed His gospel to a select group of men to whom He gave a special endowment of the Spirit of God to infallibly teach that gospel to His church and make sure that the church was not led astray into a false gospel by Satan. It was not just Peter who was selected for this. The foundation or rock of the church is according to Scripture not just Peter, but all the apostles. Thus, Paul refers to Matthew 16:18 when he speaks of the church in Ephesians 2:20: *having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone.* It is not individually, but because of his position as one of the Apostles of Christ, that Peter is the rock of the church.

B. About what church is Jesus speaking?

But what church is it of which Christ is speaking and of which Peter is the rock with the rest of the apostles of Christ? The church or assembly of which Christ is speaking is clearly what we call the universal church. This *only* is the church that will be built

among all the nations until the end of the age. But we must not think that, since it is the universal church of which Jesus is speaking, its building is something mystical and invisible to us. The universal church is in the Scriptures inseparable from the local church. The local church is the appointed and visible expression of the universal church. A particular church is the local manifestation of the one, universal body of Christ.

This is obvious from the way in which Jesus speaks of the church the very next time the word is used in Matthew. In Matthew 18:17 the church in question is the local church. According to Matthew 18:18 that local church also possesses the keys of the kingdom mentioned and given to Peter here in Matthew 16:19.

Matthew 16:19 "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."

Matthew 18:18 "Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.

This is also obvious in the way that the local church is elsewhere described in the New Testament. 1 Timothy is written to Timothy that he might know how to order the meetings of the church at Ephesus and how to conduct his ministry there. Paul, however, describes that church as a local expression of the universal church. 1 Timothy 3:15 says, "I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth." The church of Ephesus by itself or merely as a local church was not the house of God and the church of the living God and the pillar and support of the truth. It was, however, as a local church an expression of the universal church.

The universal church finds its appointed and visible expression in local churches. The building of the universal church means, therefore, the building of thousands and millions of local churches. It means the creation of local churches through the discipling, baptism, and instruction commanded in the Great Commission. Thus, the prediction of Matthew 16:18 has everything to do with local churches like GRBC of Owensboro, KY and CBC of Clarksville, TN. It is a promise that this church should take with its times of outreach and prayer. It is a promise, Pastor Ron, that I want you to take with you to Clarksville and which I hope God writes on your heart.

II. Its Promises

Christ's prediction contains two promises. I want you to consider them one at a time.

A. The First Promise: “I will build my church.”

1. Its Problem Character

A problem immediately confronts us in our study of the first promise. What possibly can Jesus mean when He speaks of building His church?

- This may not strike us as strange, but it is—scripturally speaking—very peculiar language. It does not strike us as peculiar only because we are familiar with building churches in the sense of building church buildings. This is, of course, not at all what Jesus means when he uses the word, church. A church is an assembly or congregation. How do you build an assembly or congregation?
- It may also fail to strike us as peculiar because Jesus’ words are so familiar to us. But put yourself in the sandals of Jesus’ disciples. No place in the entire Old Testament does the Old Testament speak of the building of a church. A church is an assembly or gathering. What possibly could Jesus have meant by speaking of the building of an assembly?

Though the Old Testament nowhere speaks of the building of a church, it does speak of the building of a couple of things that are quite closely related to the church *and of which Jesus was speaking in our text*.

- The Old Testament speaks of the building of the temple of God. David, Solomon, and even Cyrus undertake in the language of the Old Testament to build the temple of God (2 Sam. 7:13; 1 Chr. 22:10; 2 Chr. 36:23). Since the church is the house or temple of God, Jesus may be asking His disciples to think of Him as the new and greater king who will build the new and greater temple of God throughout the earth.
- The Old Testament also speaks of the building of Messiah’s kingdom. Perhaps it would have been of texts that speak of this building of the Messiah’s kingdom that Jesus’ disciples would first have thought when Jesus spoke of building His assembly. This building of Messiah’s kingdom is spoken of as the building up of Messiah’s throne. In Psalm 89:4-5 we read: “I will establish your seed forever And build up your throne to all generations.” The heavens will praise Your wonders, O LORD; Your faithfulness also in the assembly of the holy ones.” This is explained and expanded by Isaiah 9:7: “There will be no end to the increase of *His* government or of peace, On the throne of David and over his kingdom, To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness From then on and forevermore. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this.”

Now I said that this whole matter of the building of Messiah's kingdom is closely related to Matthew 16:18. Why? Because the next verse promises to Peter (the rock of the church) the keys of the kingdom. In this way Jesus closely associates the ideas of the church and the kingdom. It is in the building of the church throughout this age that Messiah's throne is built up to all generations. There is no end to the increase of His government or of peace as Messiah sits on the throne of David and reigns over His kingdom because the church is being built throughout the earth. Thus, the old hymn-writer was right to teach the church to sing:

Behold the mountain of the Lord in latter days shall rise
On mountain tops above the hills and draw the wond'ring eyes

To this the joyful nations round all tribes and tongues shall flow
Up to the hill of God they'll say and to his house we'll go

The beam that shines from Zion hill shall lighten every land
The King who reigns in Salem's towers shall al the world command

Among the nations he shall judge, His judgments truth shall guide
His scepter shall protect the just and quell the sinners pride

Come then, O House of Jacob, come to worship at His shrine
And walking in the light of God with holy beauties shine

2. Its Personal Character

What is also striking about this first promise is how Jesus takes personal responsibility for its fulfillment. Jesus states the promise so personally. *I will build My church!* It is as if he says: *It is my church, and I will build it.* He does not say that *the church will be built.* He says, rather, *I will build My church!* The words, *My church*, indicate the personal interest He has in the church. He is the Great Carpenter, and He will build His church. The words, *I will build*, indicates His personal commitment to its building and assume His ability to build it by almighty grace.

This reminds me of Revelation 5 where we are told that no one can take the book of the redemptive purposes of God and open it. Not until the one comes forward who is at one and the same time the lion of the tribe of Judah and the slain but living lamb with seven horns and seven eyes is anyone found who can fulfill the redemptive purposes of God. Yes, only the Lamb of God can build His church.

B. The Second Promise: "The gates of Hades will not overcome it."

1. What is the significance of the Gates of Hades?

Hades in the Bible speaks first and figuratively of the place of death or the grave. It also speaks of the place of punishment after death for sin. Death and Hades are also the last and greatest enemies of Christ's people. Remember 1 Corinthians 15:25-26: *For He must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be abolished is death.* The gates of Hades, I believe, in our text speaks of all that opposes the building of Christ's church. The last and greatest enemy stands for and represents all the enemies of Christ's kingdom.

2. Is the church pictured as on the offensive or on the defensive?

This is one of the most pressing (and complicated) questions with regard to the interpretation of Matthew 16:18.

- At first sight, the reference to the gates of Hades makes one think of the church as on the offensive besieging the city of Hades with its mighty hosts.
- At second thought, many Christians noticing the way the verb is translated in this phrase, may lean to seeing the church on the defensive. The verb is translated in the KJV and ESV *prevail* and in the NASB *overcome*. This translation makes it sound like the Gates of Hades are on the offensive. The Gates of Hades are on the offensive trying to overcome and prevail against the church, but are not able to totally overwhelm it.

Which is the correct assumption? Is the church pictured on the offensive against Hades or on the defensive? For a long time I was on the fence about this question. There came a day, however, when I experienced something of a breakthrough in terms of my understanding of the text. As a result of that breakthrough in my thinking, I now believe that the church is definitely pictured on the offensive. I believe this for two reasons.

First, the church is here pictured as **a war church**. This is strange sounding language to us, and you may well wonder what it implies. You may have never even heard of **a war church** before. Let me explain what I mean by a war-church. The Greek version of the Old Testament used by the early disciples of Christ speaks many times of *the church of Israel*. Israel became God's covenant nation on what was called the day of the church at Mount Sinai (Deut. 9:10; 18:16). Israel often gathered as a church for worship (1 Kings 18:14; 2 Chron. 29:28). The term, church, is, however, also used for assemblies of Israel for the purpose of making war. When Israel gathered to make war on its enemies, this also was called a church. It was a war assembly or a war-church! There are references to war-churches in Judges 20:2; 21:5, 8; 1 Sam 17:47; Psa.

149:1 with v. 6. I am asserting that Jesus here in Matthew 16:18 pictures His church as a war church making war on the gates of Hades.

Judges 20:2 The chiefs of all the people, *even* of all the tribes of Israel, took their stand in the **assembly** of the people of God, 400,000 foot soldiers who drew the sword.

Judges 21:5 Then the sons of Israel said, "Who is there among all the tribes of Israel who did not come up in the **assembly** to the LORD?" For they had taken a great oath concerning him who did not come up to the LORD at Mizpah, saying, "He shall surely be put to death."

Psalm 149:1 Praise the LORD! Sing to the LORD a new song, *And* His praise in the **congregation** of the godly ones.... 6 *Let* the high praises of God *be* in their mouth, And a two-edged sword in their hand,

Second, the word translated *prevail* or *overcome* should not be translated this way. This translation gives a wrong impression of its meaning in this passage. *Prevail* or *overcome* naturally suggests to us that Hades is on the offensive against the church. This word, however, does not necessarily refer to offensive warfare. Its root meaning is simply to be strong or make strong. It sometimes refers in the Old Testament to the *strengthening* or fortifying of defensive works like the gates of a city. In other words, it refers sometimes to *strengthening* defensive fortifications like walls and gates. This is clearly how it is used in Matthew 16:18 where Jesus is speaking of the gates of Hades. It should be translated this way, therefore, in Matthew 16:18. The Gates of Hades will not be strong against it, that is, against the war church of Christ. Let me show you two places where this meaning is illustrated.

2 Chronicles 26:9 Moreover, Uzziah built towers in Jerusalem at the Corner Gate and at the Valley Gate and at the corner buttress and **fortified** them.

The word translated prevail or overcome in Matthew 16:18 is here used of strengthening defensive fortifications.

2 Chronicles 32:5 And he took courage and rebuilt all the wall that had been broken down and erected towers on it, and *built* another outside wall and **strengthened** the Millo *in* the city of David, and made weapons and shields in great number.

ISBE says: "It is generally supposed that "The Millo" was some kind of fortress or other defense..." Often it is thought to be a tower. Again, then, the key word translated in Matthew 16:18 is here used of strengthening defensive fortifications.

In Matthew 16:18, then, the war church is definitely pictured as assaulting the defensive works of the city of Hades. The Gates of Hades are massive, fortified, and made strong in every way the evil one can imagine, but they cannot and do not stand. They crumble and fall before the onslaught of Christ's church. This is certainly what Jesus is teaching here. There is no question about this. The only question is whether we will believe it and act in light of it!

Conclusion:

The church is pictured on the offensive in both of the promises that make up Christ's great prediction. The church is being built. This speaks of the universal spread of Christ's kingdom. The gates of Hades will not be strong against it. This speaks of the crumbling of the defenses of the City of Hades as the symbol of the crumbling of all Christ's enemies against the onslaught of the church.

III. Its Purposes

Here I come to the application of Christ's prediction. Why did Jesus say this to Peter and the other apostles? But who was Peter? What was Peter like? He said these things to *Peter the impetuous, Peter the weak, Peter the fearful, Peter the distracted*. Peter—Jesus knew—would one day need the encouragement He here provides to him. Peter is, of course, in all these ways an apt representative of each one of us as individual followers of Christ! We also are impetuous, weak, fearful, and distracted. What encouragement, then, does Jesus give us in these promises?

(1) We must emphatically reject pessimistic views of the future of the church. We must rather strengthen our weak hands and labor for its good and glory. We must sing and mean it: *I love Thy kingdom Lord, the house of Thine abode, the church our Blest Redeemer saved with His own precious blood...For her my tears shall fall, for her my prayers ascend, to her my cares and toils be given til toils and cares shall end.*

(2) We must not fear to take bold action against the enemies of Christ's church. We must remember that Christ's church is a war church on the attack—taking the offensive. Christ's promises should embolden us to take the battle to the enemy. Christ's church is a missionary church-taking the battle to the enemy. A church that is not a missionary church is not a true church.

(3) We must not forget that the universal church as it comes to expression in local churches is the specific recipient of Christ's promises. If you want to labor at the center of God's purposes and with the full backing of Christ's promises, you must labor in, with, and for the church of Christ. I am not saying that God never

blesse parachurch organizations. I believe He does despite their deficiencies. I am saying that this promise is given to the universal church as it comes to expression in local churches. And this should greatly encourage us as we strive to see our local churches built up in holiness, usefulness, and numbers.

(4) We must not be surprised to find ourselves in a war and in need of Christ's promises in our service to His church.

We sometimes in the Christian life realize with shock that we are in a war. We may be, then, overcome with feelings of being weary and afraid because of the constant stress of battle. We may even become shell-shocked and disoriented. At those times we will need, and we must remember Christ's promises.

(5) We must remember, when we sense our overwhelming weakness and need that Jesus takes a personal interest in the building of the church! He has, as we have seen, a personal interest in His church and the personal commitment to its success. We are not able to assault in our strength the black gates of Hades. But we must never forget the terms of Christ's promise. *I will build My church.* He says, "It is my church, and I will build it." We must listen to the great Carpenter who comes along beside us and with gentle but firm voice encourages, *I will build My church; you are not alone in this work.*

(6) We must never forget that it is Christ's church and not ours. Though we may spend our lives laboring for the church, it is still not our church. We are liable to forget that it is not our church and that only He is able to build it. This calls for a double humility. We need the humility not to make it our church. We need the humility to refuse to think that we can build it. We need in all our labors constantly to hand the church back to Christ and constantly to collapse in dependence at His feet.

(7) We must embrace Christ's agenda as our own! He is out to see His church built. Are you out for the same thing? Does your life have the same agenda as Christ? Have you joined the church? Have you been baptized into the church? Are you faithful in your church? Are you faithful in attending her meetings? Are you faithful in serving her needs? Are you laboring for your church? Or does your life really say, "Jesus, it is great that you want to build your church, but that's not where my heart is or where my priorities are. Jesus, you do your thing for your church, but that's not my thing." How do you claim to be a Christian at all and not share Christ's heart to build His church? Matthew 12:30 says, "He who is not with Me is against Me; and he who does not gather with Me scatters."