

UPON THIS ROCK I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH

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SCRIPTURE: Matthew 16:13-18.

When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and other, Jeremias, or one of the prophets. He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock will I build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

No man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost.

The saying of Jesus which we have selected for consideration today as we bid you "Hear Ye Him" is probably the most frequently discussed, and the most controversial saying ever to fall from his lips. "Upon this rock I will build my church." There is a very wide disagreement as to what was the rock upon which the church was to be built, and an equally wide disagreement as to whether or not Jesus actually built a church.

First let us inquire into the meaning of the "rock" upon which Christ was to build his church. In the scripture lesson which we have previous read, Jesus inquires of his apostles, "Whom do men say that I, the Son of man am?" And they said, "Some say that thou art John the Baptist; some Elias, and other Jeremias, or one of the prophets." Then Jesus pins them down: "But whom say ye that I am?" It was Peter, the impetuous spokesman for the group, who replied, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Then came Jesus' reply: "Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona, for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter; and upon this rock will I build my church"

Was Peter the rock upon which the church was to be built? On a previous occasion Jesus had given Simon a new name, which in Jesus' Aramic tongue was Cephas, or in the Greek, Peter, meaning rock, or stone. Some commentators have suggested that this new name was given to Peter in order that he might be constantly reminded of his need for rock-like determination and stability -- for his natural disposition was volatile, impetuous, wavering. It was he who impetuously walked on the water, but sank when he began to doubt. It was he who vehemently declared that he would never betray his Lord, and then denied him three times before the cock-crow. After the Resurrection, Peter was a greatly changed man, but he still lacked the stability that marks a natural-born leader. Paul wrote to the Galatians that he once withstood Peter to his face, because he was to be blamed. In the church councils, such as the one in the 15th chapter of Acts which was called to discuss the place of Jewish law in the Christian church, Peter made a speech, but it was James, the Lord's brother who presided, and who handed down the decision. Peter was chief among the apostles, but he was not the head of the church after Christ's ascension, nor was he the rock on which the church was built.

There is another indication which points us to the conclusion that Peter was not the rock upon which the church was built, even though he was the "rock man," or the man of rock. When Jesus says, "Thou art Peter," the Greek word for Peter is "petros," masculine gender. When he says "Upon this rock will I build my church," the Greek word for rock is "petra," feminine gender. The "rock" of Peter, and the "rock" upon which the church was to be built are not the same.

The rock upon which the church of Christ is built is the fact of Jesus' unique, peculiar, and distinctive divinity or deity -- the fact that he is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God. Many people had surmised, or guessed, or assumed that Jesus was the Christ previous to this experience in Caesarea Philippi. The apostles believed it. But now comes an experience of revelation, by which the apostle (with Peter as their spokesman) know that Jesus is what they had previously assumed and believed him to be. Such knowledge had to be imparted by divine revelation. No man can tell another man in such a way that he knows. One man may testify, or bear witness to another that Jesus is the Christ, but no man can say that Jesus is the Lord but by the Holy Ghost. No man knows that Jesus is the Christ unless God reveals it to him. Therefore there is always need in the church for the processes of revelation, by which men are made to know that Jesus is the Christ, and by which their feet are firmly planted on the rock that cannot move -- the rock of Christ's deity and divine sonship, and Messiahship. The church is built on the rock of Christ's Messiahship, as revealed to each believer by a continuous and continuing process of revelation through the Holy Spirit.

So much for the discussion of the rock upon which the church is built. Now for a brief moment, let us consider whether Jesus ever built a church. The common belief is that the church was organized on the day of Pentecost, after Jesus' ascension; that before then there were no plans, no blueprints, no organization; that the growth of the church after Pentecost was largely accidental. Some have gone so far as to say that the church numbered exactly 140 persons at Pentecost -- the eleven, Jesus' brethren, and the 120 disciples mentioned in Acts 1:15.

Mark and Matthew both describe the crowds that came to John the Baptist for baptism. John 4:1 says that Jesus made and baptized more disciples than John. Baptism is the initiatory rite which gives membership in the church. Evidently there were more than 140 baptized church members on the day of Pentecost, though all of them may not have been present in the upper room.

Jesus said "I will build my church." That expresses determination, or promise. The word "build" does not suggest a haphazard accumulation together of miscellaneous officers as the need for them arose. It indicates purpose, plan, organization. Jesus chose twelve apostles, which Paul says were "set in the church." He also chose seventy men and sent them out as missionary assistants to the apostles. Then at a later date, he chose "other seventy," which alone would make 140 members of the church, not counting the apostles or any of the baptized disciples and believers who followed Jesus during his lifetime. Though little is said about it in the gospels, it seems logical, reasonable, and inescapable, that Jesus had plans, and a blueprint for his church; that certain offices in it were there from the beginning, though not filled with officers until the church had grown to the point where they were needed.

There is another indication that there was some sort of church organization in existence in Jesus' day. In the 18th chapter of Matthew he gives instruction for dealing with offenses that arise between members. If preliminary attempts at reconciliation fail, the instruction is to "tell it to the church." Certainly Jesus did not mean to tell it to tell it to the Pharisees, whom he had condemned so many times. Neither could he have meant to tell it to someone who didn't know what to do. There must have been some officers, and some procedures for dealing with offenses if they arose in the church.

We believe that Jesus did organize a church; that certain officers were "set" in that church even in Jesus' day; that certain functional offices existed from the beginning, even though some of the officers were not chosen to fill the office until the church had reached a size to need and to supply them. We believe that those officers were then given authority to function along specific lines, in order that there might be unity in the church; in order that men might not be blown about with every wind of doctrine; in order that divine power might be made manifest through the ordinances of the church to forgive men's sins and bring them the new birth that fits them for the kingdom of God. We believe that the church is founded upon the rock of Jesus Christ, upon the fact that he is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. We believe that flesh and blood cannot reveal that to any man; that no man can say that Jesus is the Lord, but by the Holy Ghost, through the revelation of God.