

THE CHURCH – THE JESUS PROJECT
MATTHEW 16:13-20

INTRODUCTION:

I want you to take a moment and look around. What you see here this morning is the assembly of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ that is known as the First Baptist Church in Lubbock.

How you see what you see can be affected by a number of things. But regardless of how you see this assembly, this is still a project of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Michael Medved, the film critic, indicates that if you come out of the secular world you may be surprised by what you see. He has a little game he plays at Hollywood parties in which he asks the Hollywood type, “How many people do you think go to church every week in America?” Many times they respond to Michael, “No one I know goes to church.” Then Medved will say, “No, seriously.” “Guess.” Usually they will guess about 1%. The highest estimate he has ever heard was 10%. Did you know that on an average weekend about 40% of the people in America will attend a church or a synagogue. This is actually more of the population than will watch a Super Bowl on television in any year. The culturally elite of our society have written off the church as being of little or no significance.

If you are a young adult, you may see the church through consumer eyes. Sociologists indicate that the younger part of the adult population looks at church quite differently from their parents and grandparents. They tend to look at the church in terms of what the church can do for them. They want to know of the benefits that will accrue to them if they become a part of the church.

Some of you in the middle years of life have an entirely different perspective. When you look at the church you look through a special set of glasses. The glasses were provided to you by some hurt or disappointment with the church in the past. Consequently every time you see a church, you remember that pain. You judge every church on the bases of that one hurtful experience in a church.

Any of you who are my age will look at the church with a profound sense of gratitude. The church has ministered to you and played a special part in your life and the life of your family. Alice and I thank God every day for the churches that we have had the privilege of being a part of. This obviously includes this beloved congregation assembled here this morning.

However, I want us to look at the church from an entirely different perspective this morning. I want us to look at the church as a “Jesus project.” In order to gain such a perspective I want us to go back to the first time Jesus ever used the word church. At least the first time it was recorded in scripture. It happened in an isolated section of northern Galilee with a small group of His disciples. On that day He said to His disciples, “I will built my church.” In discussing His plans to built His church He talked about “a rock,” “some keys,” and some “gates.” As you consider the rock, the keys, and the gates it is obvious that the church is a “Jesus project.” It is a work which Jesus began while He was still on the earth and continues from His exalted position at the right hand of the Father. Jesus is still building His church. If you can ever see the church from the prospective of Jesus, it will make a difference in the way you relate to the church.

I guess another way of stating what I want to do this morning would be that I want to kill some dragons. Ron Crandel in a book entitled, Turn Around Strategies for The Small Church, lists five dragons that are threatening the life of the church. The dragons he lists are: low self-esteem and apathy, lack of vision for the future, little love for outsiders, inadequate finances, and inner personal conflicts. I don't know of anything that would destroy these dragons quicker than to gain a perspective of the church that reflects the church as "the Jesus Project."

I. THE ROCK – JESUS DETERMINES THE FOUNDATION OF THE CHURCH.

The statement about the church was preceded by the great confession of Simon Peter. When Jesus asked, "Whom do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." The response of Simon to the inquiry of Jesus must have brought a warm glow to the heart of our Lord.

The statement that He made in response to this confession of Peter refers to "the rock." Jesus said, "Blessed are you Simon, Son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven and I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." Jesus exercised his prerogatives as the Son of God to choose the foundation for His church. Since this conversation in Caesarea Philippi, the builder of the Church, the Lord Jesus, has been utilizing the same foundation. Every local assembly, even this local assembly rests on the same rock.

What is the rock? There have been many debates among students of scripture about the identity of the rock. Questions revolve around two or three issues. When Jesus said, "You are Peter," He used the word for "rock." The name "Peter" means "rock." He used the masculine form of the

Greek word for rock as it is translated in the Greek New Testament. But when He said, “On this rock I will build my church,” He used the word for rock in the feminine form. In Greek the word in masculine form was commonly used of a smaller rock while the feminine form was reserved for a massive stone. So, the question has been, “Did Jesus mean that the man Peter was the rock? Or was He referring to some other massive stone that would serve as the foundation?”

Some have understood that the rock was actually the confession that Simon Peter gave. They understand that the church is made up of men and women to whom God has revealed Himself and has brought them to the place that they can give the kind of confession that Peter gave. They have personally come to an understanding that Jesus is none other than the Messiah of Israel and the Son of the Living God.

Others have said that the man Peter himself is the rock. They believe that Jesus was making this first and chief apostle the rock upon which the church was to be built.

Others have understood the word rock against the Old Testament background. They contend that Jesus would surely have used the word as it was used in the Old Testament. A number of times in the Old Testament the rock is used as a metaphor for God. God Himself is the rock upon which His people is built. To encourage this understanding when we read the first letter that Peter wrote that is in our New Testament, we find Him referring to Jesus as the foundation stone that God has selected for the church.

When you brush away all of the confusion, you come away with two convictions. First, Jesus Christ Himself is the ultimate rock upon which He Himself builds His church. There can be no question about this in light of the full revelation of scripture. But second, those who are built upon this foundation and consequently make up the church are stones like Simon Peter. They are sinful human beings who have been brought by the grace of God into an understanding that Jesus is the Messiah, the Savior, the Lord! Based on that inner understanding of who He is, they are prepared to confess Him before men.

If you look at the Church as the Jesus project, the first thing you will notice is the foundation. It is the most prominent thing about the Church. The Church is built upon the unshakable immovable rock of ages, Jesus the Son of God. The church is made up of redeemed and regenerated human beings who have their faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior. It is a joy to be associated in any way with the church that Jesus is building.

II. THE KEYS – JESUS ASSIGNS THE FUNCTION OF THE CHURCH.

When Jesus had spoken the word about the foundation, then He spoke some other words that have become clouded with controversy. He said to Peter and probably to the others present that day, “I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and what ever you loose on earth will be loose in heaven.” The controversy has grown up around the identity of these keys. In the exaltation of Simon Peter to an unnatural position in the church, an unnatural connotation has been given to the keys.

The group that first heard these words would have understood the nature of the keys immediately. The figure was used throughout the Old Testament for authority, more specifically the authority of the teacher. A statement that Jesus made in Luke's Gospel will help us see that this was the way that used this term. He declared, "Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered and you have hindered those who were entering." Keys represented the work of a steward or a teacher. In those first century homes a trusted servant would be given the keys to the house. He had the authority of the master to permit people to enter the house or to shut the door and keep people out of the house. This kind of imagery began to be attached to the role of the teacher. The teacher has been entrusted by God with the truth. As He presents the truth as He has received it, He opens the door to those who will receive the truth, and He shuts the door to those who reject the truth. So, the function that Jesus is assigning to Peter and the other apostles and to all who would come after them is that of preaching and teaching the Word of the Gospel to the multitudes. As the Word is taught the doors are opened to the Kingdom of God and the doors are closed to the Kingdom of God.

The tense of the verbs used in this statement help us understand some of the significance of the statement. He uses a future perfect tense which carries in it the idea concerning the binding and loosing that the things bound on earth have already been bound in heaven, and the things loosed on earth have already been loosed in heaven. In other words, we are not given the authority to decide what will be loosed and what will be bound for God has already done that and settled it in heaven. Our role is rather to present and expound and exhort the human family concerning the things that God has loosed and that God has bound. As they receive the message of the Gospel,

they are loosed from their sins through forgiveness. As they reject the gospel they are bound by their sins for eternity. The function of the church is that of using the keys to the kingdom of heaven to bring as many as possible into God's eternal kingdom.

But this is the correct understanding of the keys becomes obvious as you pursue the life and ministry of Simon Peter in the book of Acts. On the Day of Pentecost he used these keys as He proclaimed the gospel and opened the door to the kingdom and 3,000 souls came in. Sometime later he used these same keys in the house of Cornelius and a Gentile came through the open door to the Kingdom of God. This is our task.

We must not become confused about who we are and why we are here. Even though in Conquest we are attempting to renew these facilities, our function is not to maintain a building down town. Our function is to use the keys of the kingdom to open the door to the kingdom of heaven to every man, woman, and child in this community. We are here to aggressively and intentionally confront all men with the claims of the Kingdom of God. We are here to invite men to become wholehearted disciples of Jesus of Nazareth and thus become a part of this assembly with us.

This function of the church never changes!

III. THE GATES – JESUS ASSURES THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH.

Jesus attached a wonderful promise to His statement about the church. He said, “On this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” This is an encouraging, positive word concerning the future of the church.

In this statement “Hades” refers to the realm of the dead. The gates refers to the power or authority of the realm of the dead. So this promise has to do with the relationship of the church to the realm of the dead. There are two possible understandings of this statement and both of them are true.

First the words can be understood in the sense that death will never destroy the church. It can be a statement of assurance that the church will survive through the ages until the Lord Jesus Himself comes in all of His glory. When you look back over the history of the church it will amaze you how the church of Jesus Christ has survived. There have been times when it looked like the enemies of the church might prevail and that the church would pass from the scene of history only to have a fresh infusion of the grace of God that brought the church to new life and vitality. Be slow to give up on the church! Jesus has assured us that the gates of hell will never overcome the church. That is death itself will never conquer the church.

The other idea that is in this expression is that even though generations of Christians will go behind the gates of death, the gates of death will not be able to hold them. It is a promise that someday when the Lord Jesus comes in all of His glory that the church of Jesus Christ will break out of the realm of the dead in resurrection glory to join Him in His eternal kingdom. When the last dot has been put to the last chapter of human history, the church of Jesus Christ will be

triumphant with her Lord. She will come out of the grave dressed in robes of splendor to join Him in His rule over the ages. The church will triumph! Her future is as bright as the glory and power of her Lord.

Do you remember those dragons that Ron Crandel identified in his book? They are the dragons that threaten the health and vitality of every church. He said that they are: low self esteem, apathy, lack of vision for the future, little love for outsiders, inadequate finances and inner personal conflicts. I said that I wanted to bring you a word that would at least wounded or at slay these dragons. Seeing the church from the perspective of Jesus as the Jesus project ought to do this.

How can we have low self-esteem and apathy as a church if we realize that Jesus Christ the risen Lord is the builder of the church. We are His personal project. We are a part of what the exalted Son of God is doing in history in our day. There is no room for self-esteem for those who know themselves to be a part of the church of the living Christ.

How can a lack of vision survive if you have taken a look at the church from Jesus' perspective. It will not be stopped or thwarted by "the gates of hell." The best days for the church for the Lord Jesus Christ are always ahead.

"Little love for outsiders," this dragon will utterly be destroyed by the Jesus perspective. The basic function of the church is to use the keys to open the doors to eternal life to the outsider. This is why we exist.

The dragon of inadequate finances – surely, surely, seeing the church as the Jesus project will take care of this. Young adults will no longer look at the church in terms of “What can they do for me?” Middle aged adults will throw away those glasses that have distorted their view of the church because of some prior hurt.

The dragon of inner personal conflicts will surely also be destroyed. Internal personal conflicts usually arise when the church is not busy about its main business. The church that is busy about the main business of taking the gospel to the whole world rarely ever encounters this dragon.

So, people of God, let’s realize who we are and move toward our future with confidence in the risen Christ. We are His project!