

“God’s Victorious Church”

Matthew 16:13-19

I have heard that it was said of Socrates, the classical Greek philosopher, that he was considered to be wise not so much because he knew all the right answers, but because he knew how to ask the right questions. The ‘Socratic Method’ of argument is based on asking questions that are designed to provoke thought.

I recently discovered a book that has been around for a couple of decades. It is called, “The Book of Questions,” and it contains some 300 questions that are intended to be used as conversation starters. Some of the questions are tough, and the way you answer them may in fact reveal your true character. Most of the questions in the Book of Questions are random questions of ‘what.’ The least asked questions in the book, however, are questions of ‘why.’ (I can guarantee you that the author has never met my 6 year old son...)

When it comes to the church, we often seek to answer the question, “What?” But I’m convinced we don’t spend enough time considering the ‘why’ questions. Why church?

With this in mind, I am beginning a new sermon series this morning, and I have given it the title, “Convictions of a Disciple-Making Church.” Convictions are those essential beliefs that we hold because we are convinced. Our ‘what’ has a ‘why.’

The purpose of the church is to bring glory to God, and the mission of the church is to make disciples of all nations. We fulfill our purpose when we are faithful to our mission.

The Bible says in Acts 20:28 that the church has been purchased with the blood of Jesus Christ, which means it is the most important spiritual institution in human history. You can take all the Fortune 500 companies that have ever existed, lump them all together in a pile, and they won't be a drop in the bucket when compared to the infinite worth of the church of Jesus Christ.

This means that nothing is more important for us to understand than what God wants us to learn about the church and our role in the church as individual believers. Although we are saved on an individual basis, the Bible says that we are formed into family. Just as a baby is born into the context of a family, those who are 'born again' are members of the household of faith. Since this is true, a local church must understand its identity and the purpose for its existence. We need to know the answer to the question of 'why,' as in, "Why the church?" Just as a child needs a healthy functioning family, so also does the child of God. It is essential that the local church provide a biblically sound and healthy context for disciples to grow.

When I was praying through this next series, questions came up in my mind, such as, "What do we as a church want to be known for?" Or, "What are the non-negotiables for our ministry?" And, "Why are they important?" From Scripture, we've determined six core convictions that are held by a local church that is committed to making disciples. These core convictions are true of the early church, and they must also undergird everything that we do now. Over the next several weeks, I want us to look at the example of the early church in the New Testament and examine what they made priority.

But before I go any further, I think that we need to stop and consider some unpleasant facts about the current state of the church here in the U.S. Here's just a sample:

- 6,000 churches close their doors every year
- 3,500 Americans leave the church every day
- only 1 pastor out of 10 retires while still in ministry
- 74% of Americans claim to be Christian, yet less than 20% regularly attend church
- only 15% of churches are growing numerically
- only 2% of growing churches are effectively winning people to Christ

Those are some general statistics from a wide range of evangelicalism in America. Let's get a bit more specific.

We are a SBC church. While I was in Dallas back in June, I heard some of these statistics about where we are as a convention of churches. Consider that last year:

- The number of SBC churches grew for the 19th consecutive year reaching a total of 47,544 churches which represents a 16.3% increase since 1997
- Membership fell for the 11th consecutive year to around 15 million; since 2006 SBC congregations have lost around 1.3 million members
- Baptisms have also declined steadily over the last decade; congregations reports baptizing 254,122 people; that is 26.5% fewer than 2007; 1 baptism for every 59 members
- in 1946 we baptized 253,361 with half the number of churches; U.S. population in 1946 was 141 million; last year the U.S. population was 324 million

At some point while we were not paying attention, the world around us changed. Our society has become unhinged. The world we live in is no longer the world of our parents' and grandparents' generation. Ours is a post-modern, post-truth culture. We are now living in the post-Christian western world. This explains why we now find ourselves in a culture that is less friendly to the church and is even hostile to the Judeo-Christian ethic our nation was founded upon. Our 21st century world is becoming a lot like the 1st century Roman world that surrounded the very first group of Jesus followers known as the church.

Since this is true, should it not also stand to reason that the 21st century church become more like the 1st century church, which was so effective in reaching their world? For that to happen, we as a church must be gripped by the same convictions that they were gripped by. We need to be equipped with the same power and resolve that they were moved by, because let me tell you something:

- More machinery is not going to get the job done
- Better marketing is not going to get the job done
- More money, more talent, more cool factor is not going to get the job done

The early church was contagious, and the Roman world took notice. What we need now is what they had then, and the good news is that it is still available. But only when we approach the church and its mission the way that they did. We need the right convictions. We need disciples who are gripped by the conviction that the church is a disciple-making factory for God's glory.

I've had you turn to Matthew 16 because this is where I want us to start. The very first time that the word 'church' is used in the New Testament is found here in verse 18 where Jesus declared His intention to build His church:

“I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

“Church” —*the word in Greek is ‘ekklesia’*

It’s a compound word, from ‘ek’ which means out from, and ‘kaleo’ which means to call. Thus, it refers to those who have been called out from among others. It is a word that speaks of an assembly of people who are defined by a distinct purpose, or given a distinct objective.

The idea is that the church is a special assembly of people who have been ‘called out of’ the world and are made to be the special people of God, called out by God for Himself.

The use of this word is important because it means that the church is not merely some institution, or a building, or an organization. The church of Jesus Christ is God’s plan for the ages, the means by which He has determined to make a name for Himself among the nations.

This text gives us a glimpse of God’s victorious church, and Jesus outlines what He intends for His church to be.

1. The REVELATION the church has been given (16:13-17)

“Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter replied, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”

By the time we get to this point in the gospel of Matthew, it had been a very busy season of ministry for Jesus and His disciples. He had begun to face confrontation with the religious establishment in Jerusalem. The Pharisees and the Sadducees were convinced that Jesus was a threat to their religious system and they were determined to do whatever they had to do to get rid of Him.

Jesus withdraws from ministering to the crowds and He goes with His twelve disciples to the region of Caesarea Philippi. It was 120 miles away from Jerusalem, and was located in the northernmost territory of Israel, some 25 miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee. Gentile populated.

The region was strongly identified with various religions. It had been a center for Baal worship; the Greek god Pan had shrines there; Herod the Great had built a temple there to honor Caesar Augustus. (Mix of both Jew and Gentile)

It was here in this remote area, an area that had known a strong Gentile influence, that He has a conversation with His disciples about His future plans.

A question that is asked

Jesus asked His disciples an all-important question. It is the same question that every person must grapple with:

“Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

Who is Jesus Christ? Listen—before you can understand the purpose of the church, you need to know the person of Jesus Christ. The church makes no sense apart from Him!

Now, depending on who you ask, you will hear a variety of answers. Look at how the disciples respond—“Some say that you are John the Baptist! Some say that you are Elijah, or Jeremiah, or some other prophet!”

Most people don't have a hard time acknowledging that Jesus was a good teacher or a religious figure in history. As long as Jesus is spoken of in strictly human terms, for the most part people have no problem acknowledging His accomplishments. "Is He someone to be admired? Yes. Is He someone to be worshiped? No."

But notice in verse 15 that Jesus asks a more direct and specific question of His disciples:

"But who do you say that I am?"

That is, "As My disciples, those who have followed Me up close and personal, who have seen My miracles, who have witnessed My power being demonstrated—who do you all say that I am?" The 'you' there is plural.

An answer that is given

Without a moment's hesitation, verse 16 says that it is Peter who speaks up all of the sudden. That shouldn't surprise us, given what we know about Peter. Peter was none too shy. Listen to what he says—"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." In other words, "You are more than a prophet—You are Deity. You are our Hope." It is a recognition that He is omnipotent Deity wrapped up in perfect humanity. Peter confesses Him to be the fulfillment of Israel's Messianic hope. He is the One whom the prophets foretold would come. He is David's true Son!

Notice in v. 17 how Jesus responds to Peter's confession:

"Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven."

Peter had confessed the truth of who Jesus Christ really is, a truth that he himself did not stumble upon. Rather, it was a truth that had been revealed to him by God the Father. The truth of who Jesus is has been revealed by God to the church. And no one can truly be a part of the church apart from confessing their faith in Christ.

The church is a body of believers, those who are absolutely convinced that Jesus Christ is the one and only Son of the living God, the Savior of the world.

2 Corinthians 4:3-4—“And even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing. In their case, the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.”

Before a person will ever be saved, God has to take the blinders off of that person’s eyes about who Jesus is.

2. The FOUNDATION the church is built upon (16:18)

“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

Not only do we see the revelation the the church has been given, but notice also the foundation the church is built upon.

A foundational principle

This is one of the most important statements in the whole Bible about the church, and at the same time, it is also one of the most controversial. Some hold to the view that the church is built upon Peter. Yet that is not what Jesus is saying here at all.

Jesus is using a play on words, and in the language of the New Testament, it is more easily seen than in your English translation.

Jesus refers to Peter as ‘Petros,’ which means stone. Yet He promises that He will build His church on the ‘petra’ which means massive rock. Peter is a small stone, but the massive rock upon which Jesus will build His church is the confession that He is the Christ.

But there is more here in the text and the use of the word ‘petra.’ It was a word used in classical Greek to refer to a collection of stones fused together to form a larger rock.

As ‘petros,’ Peter would be one stone in the spiritual house that is built upon the ‘petra’ made up of multiple stones. ‘Petra’ meant many stones joined together to form a rock that is far larger and more significant than any one stone could be all by itself.

Peter himself says as much:

1 Peter 2:5—“You yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

Ephesians 2:19-22—“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.”

The point is that the church is founded upon Jesus Christ, whom Peter and the apostles preached as being crucified, buried, and raised to life. He is the Solid Rock!

Foundational promise

Jesus says, “**I will** build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Jesus Christ is the Originator of the church. The church is His idea. He is protecting it. He is directing it. He is its faithful Head. This is a promise, a statement of intention, and a statement of fact.

Jesus said, “I will **build** My church.”

You say, “Wait a minute. What about those statistics you gave earlier? It doesn’t sound to me like the church is being built! Sounds to me like it is losing ground!”

It could be that a lot of what has passed as the church is now being exposed for the man-made substitute that it really is. Jesus said that He will build His church, not some watered down, American-made, pseudo version. And furthermore, don’t let burgeoning crowds and massive arenas full of religious people convince you that this always constitutes the true church. The church of Jesus Christ is known by the gospel it proclaims and the fruit it produces.

At the time Jesus made this statement, Peter and the rest of the disciples were clueless as to how Jesus would build His church. They didn’t understand that He would suffer and die on a cross, be resurrected from the dead, ascend into heaven, and send His Spirit to indwell them. But that is what exactly happened. 12 became 120 became 3,000.

How does Jesus build His church? He does so by the power of His Spirit, through the preaching of His gospel, by the agency of His people. That’s what

He's doing right now all throughout the world. It began at a precise moment in time. Yet what He began all those many centuries ago continues now, and it will continue until the very last 'stone' is laid to complete it.

3. The EXPECTATION the church can have (16:19)

"...and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven."

Listen to what Jesus says you and I can expect—"I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

The church has staying power! Against all odds, Jesus has promised that the church will prevail. The gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Jesus paints the picture of His triumphant church that is on the offensive. The idea is not that the church is trying to stop the advancement of hell. Rather, hell is trying its dead level best to stop the forward advancement of the church—but it cannot!

"Gates" —*represent authority and power*

The city gate in the ancient world was the equivalent to what 'city hall' is in our present day. The gate of a city was a place of authority, a place of access, a place where decisions were made. The elders of a city would sit at the gate and conduct the city's business and make decisions on behalf of the city's citizens. (illus. of Boaz in Ruth 4:1)

Jesus Christ has guaranteed that the forces of hell will not win the battle because it has already been fought and won at the cross.

The church is the only thing on earth that is assured of victory. There's no guarantee that my career will not lose out at some point. There's no promise that

my financial situation won't experience a reversal. God has not sworn to build up my business, or my own little empire. He has not even declared the United States will always be a world superpower. He has, however, decreed that His church be successful. It will not fail because He cannot fail.

The church of Jesus Christ must prevail!

This is to be our confidence as a church as we go about our mission of making disciples. Gates imply authority, and keys imply access.

You can't get anywhere without a key. It takes a key to unlock a door. It takes a key to start an engine. It takes a key to crack a code. Keys are necessary for access.

Jesus says that He has given the 'keys' of the kingdom to His church. Jesus has given His people access to the resources of heaven. As the church storms the gates of hell, we've been given the 'kingdom keys' that will free the prisoners. Our mission is to establish the rule of God in the hearts of people, to bring the values of heaven and the priorities of God's kingdom to bear on every aspect of our culture.

Tony Evans — *“God created the church to be His agency in this age representing His bigger plan, which is the kingdom. Satan knows this, which is why he works so hard to keep churches divided. He knows that if God's people ever really get together, his influence will be severely limited. The kingdom keys of Matthew 16:19 are plural because the gates of hell are plural. This means that for every hellish gate Satan throws open against us, there is a corresponding kingdom key that opens a kingdom door behind which are the resources we need to meet that challenge.”*

What a tremendous thought! Jesus said, “I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” The church is a spiritual body that has been equipped with spiritual power! This is necessary if we are going to make disciples the way that Jesus has commanded us to do.

What are the six convictions of a disciple-making church that we are going to look at over the next several weeks?

- **Corporate prayer**—The church must be devoted to prayer because we are engaged in spiritual warfare.
- **Biblical teaching**—The Word of God is primary.
- **Personal evangelism**—We are to go to every place of society with the gospel message of salvation in Christ.
- **Intentional relationships**—Believers grow in their faith in the context of community.
- **Gospel-centered ministry**—We must not reduce our ministry to ‘word only.’ We've been called to action.
- **Global mission**—The Great Commission demands that we take to the gospel to every nation.

Go ahead and try to name another institution, company, or government that is still committed to carrying out its founder’s purpose 2,000 years after it was formed! God’s victorious church is in a class all by itself.

- Human organizations crumble
- Man-made governments fall

Alexander the Great conquered the world and spread his Greek culture, but within a few years of his death, his kingdom was divided up among his generals. Even though Rome was given the designation of 'the eternal city,' its glory is long gone.

But the church of Jesus Christ lives on! Are you a part? If not, let me invite you to turn from your sin and trust in Jesus Christ now as your Savior. He died on the cross to save you from sin's power. He rose again from the dead, and He is ready to give you eternal life! To be saved is to be part of God's wonderful family —the church.

"Father, we praise You for the promise that Jesus will build His church. I thank You that I get to be a part of it. Fill us with Your Spirit, and may we as a church relentlessly pursue Your glory and be the disciple-making church that You intend for us to be. Amen."