

## **WELCOME TO JESUS' CHURCH** "It is His church"

Though the tendency may be to check other history books for a record of the church's beginnings and development, the place to start is in the most reliable account of her conception and infancy that we have. I'm talking about the Scriptures. The church was conceived first in the heart and mind of God. It was not an afterthought, as some seem to think, but part of His divine plan all along. To the church in Ephesus, the apostle Paul said this:

**Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ, just as He chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him. (Ephesians 1:3-4)**

Jesus introduced this plan to His disciples in **Matthew 16:15-16** which is the text for today's sermon. I draw your attention to that passage now. It will be on the screen. <sup>13</sup> **When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"** <sup>14</sup> **They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."** <sup>15</sup> **"But what about you?" He asked. "Who do you say I am?"** Let's pause here a moment. People we encounter still today have varied opinions of who they think Jesus is. There may be no more important issue than that. Who is Jesus? Is He a prophet of God? If so, is He of the same caliber as other prophets who came before Him? The answer is "yes" and "no" \_ for He is a prophet of God, but like none other before or after. Read on...

<sup>16</sup> **Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."** There you have it. Jesus is the Christ\_ the Messiah, the promised deliverer. He is the One sent by God to redeem and to rescue\_ to save and sanctify. Yet, He's unique here, too. Unlike Moses, and Gideon, and Samson, He is God's one and only Son. John the apostle referred to Him as the Word that was with God and was God, the "*monogenes*" \_ the one and only begotten of the Father\_ God in the flesh.

<sup>17</sup> **Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven."** <sup>18</sup> **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.** <sup>19</sup> **I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will (have been) bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will (have been) loosed in heaven."** <sup>20</sup> **Then He warned His disciples not to tell anyone that He was the Christ.**

Peter's response prompted Jesus to announce His plans to build *His church*. Up to this point, there was little if any indication of that intent. There are those who interpret Jesus' words to mean that Peter was going to be the foundation of the church, the first "*pope*" as it were. Though it is true that the name Peter in Greek means pebble, immediate context\_ as well as the Biblical record of what actually took place\_ makes it pretty clear that Jesus' had something else in mind. It wasn't Peter per-se', but rather the reality that he confessed that would be the foundation of the Lord's church. Even the keys to the kingdom that we so often hear in jokes to be Peter's sole possession, Jesus says here were to be given to all the apostles. The word "*you*" in our text is plural. Jesus literally said He was going to give the keys to "*you all*".

But\_ what is this church Jesus said He would build? Maybe we should start by explaining what it is not. The word Jesus uses is "*ekklesia*" – and the most literal translation I can think of would be "*the called out ones.*" It usually refers to "*a gathering*" or "*an assembly*" that has come together for a unified purpose. It is sometimes even used in the Bible to describe a mob\_ even those in the book of Acts that rioted in opposition to the preaching of the gospel. I recall vividly when a neighbor of ours said to me: "*It seems that you guys care more about the people in your church than you do the church.*"

Though I appreciated her sentiment, her words indicated her misconception. Jesus' church may gather in a building, but it's not a cathedral, a temple, a chapel, or a little brown church in the vale. **He was not promising to build a physical structure.** He was talking about His disciples, not the place where they might choose to meet. If there is a holy sanctuary on earth today it is within the hearts of His followers, not in a room within a building made with human hands.

You have likely heard of at least one "building" that was **only a backdrop** for power trips and greed. And one of the hot topics today is whether a church should even own property, let alone pour millions of dollars into facilities while people are living in extreme poverty all over the world. Let me say this: I have been part of church plants that had to rent buildings and grounds for every gathering\_ and I have pastored churches that had the luxury of a place to meet and to use as a base for ministry. There is no inherent good or evil in either. It is our stewardship of resources that is important.

**Jesus was not talking about building an institution either.** Though members of His church follow His teaching and incorporate the clear instructions in Scripture about how to live in this world\_ as well as follow the Spirit's leading when they gather, it is not a particular denomination or religious body. It's not a set of rituals and rules of a liturgical order. It's not an organization filled with empty ceremony, It is a living, breathing organism. Perhaps **nothing has caused more confusion** on this matter than the insistence of men that they have a corner on how a church should function and hold services. I honestly believe that if Martin Luther, John Wesley, Alexander Campbell, John Calvin, and Barton Stone were made aware of the division that has been fostered in their names, they'd be deeply grieved. They all wanted believers to move in unison closer to Jesus\_ not move farther away from one another.

Jesus' church began without buildings or borders. After Jesus' death, burial, and resurrection, He addressed His faithful followers once more. In **Matthew 28:18-20** He commissioned them to go and make disciples from every nation, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit\_ and teaching them to obey all of His teaching. In **Acts 2** we find Peter standing up with the rest of the apostles to present the keys to the kingdom to a gathering of devout Jews from every nation. His message concluded with this statement: <sup>(37-</sup>

**4) "Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ."**

Reading on: **When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off — for all whom the Lord our God will call." With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day. They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.**

Take note that when the people responded in faith to the claim that Jesus was the Christ, they were baptized into Him and they were added to a community of people who stand together on **the rock solid confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.** This is the foundation upon which Jesus' church was conceived\_

and there can be no other. The good news is that ***all are welcome***. The promise of forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit is for all that hear the Lord's call. That's what the Holy Spirit said through Peter and the apostles. Hear the call\_ and respond in faith. All you have to do is "***Come***"...