

21. “I Will Build My Church”

“When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, ‘Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?’ So they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered and said, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ Jesus answered and said to him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ Then He commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ.” (Matthew 16:13-20)

In this text Jesus speaks of the Church. The word Church comes from a Greek word, *ekklésia*, which means “those who are called out of” something—in this case it is a question of being called out of the world to form a people set apart for the Lord. Although Jesus uses the expression “build the Church,” we need to recognize that in the Bible the word Church never refers to a physical building, such as a chapel or other place of worship. The Church is a group of people, an assembly. From what Jesus said in this passage, we want to focus on three ideas. We will pose three questions. First, “Who is the founder of the Church?” Next “What is the foundation of the Church?” And finally, “What is the role of the apostle Peter in the Church?”

WHO IS THE FOUNDER OF THE CHURCH?

From the short statement of Jesus, “I will build my Church,” we can identify several truths. We learn that at the time when Jesus was speaking, the Church did not exist, because he talks of the future—“I will build my Church.” We see that the Church would belong to Jesus. He calls it “my Church.” This would not be the Church of this

or that man, but the Church of Jesus Christ. We see that Jesus planned for only one Church. Today, we see a multiplicity of Churches, but this is not part of the plan of Jesus. He said “my Church” in the singular, and not “my Churches” in the plural. And finally, we see in the same verse that it was Jesus who would be the builder or founder of the Church.

Some people are surprised by this idea. They think that the Church is perhaps a good thing, but that it is a creation of men. Jesus says that it is he who built the Church. When a man who works in a city or even in another country sends money to his village for construction materials, when he chooses a plan for a house and hires a contractor or workers, we say that he is building his house. It is true that he is not the one who personally does the carpentry or installs the electrical lines, but he is one who is building the house. In the same way, Jesus was not physically in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost when the Church was established. It was the apostles who preached the Gospel, announced the conditions of salvation, baptized people and strengthened the converts by their teaching. But it was Jesus who was building his Church through all of this.

According to Acts 20:28, he bought the Church with his own blood. According to Acts 2:47, he is the one who “added to the Church daily those who were being saved.” And according to Ephesians 3:10,11, this Church, far from being an invention of men, was part of the “eternal purpose which He [God] accomplished in Christ Jesus our Lord.” It is indeed Jesus who is the founder of the Church.

WHAT IS THE FOUNDATION OF THE CHURCH?

Our text in Matthew 16 also speaks of the rock on which the Church would be built. What is this foundation? Jesus said to the apostle Peter in verse 18, “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”

Many people think that Jesus promised here to build his Church on the apostle Peter. This is not

surprising if they take this conclusion from the words of Jesus, but this possibility seems strange when we think of the very human and fallible character of Peter. In fact, some verses later in Matthew 16, Peter, in his love for the Lord but his ignorance of the plan of God, tries to convince Jesus that he must not die on the cross. Jesus tells him, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men." And later on, Peter will deny Jesus, saying with an oath that he does not know him. According to Galatians 2:11-14, the apostle Paul had to reproach Peter when the latter fell into a sort of hypocrisy. Make no mistake: the apostle Peter was a great man of God. After having fallen into error, he would pull himself together and serve God with much courage. But as we have just seen, he was human as we are and sometimes unstable. He was certainly not strong and unwavering enough to serve as the foundation of the Church of God.

Take into consideration now another passage of the New Testament—1 Corinthians 3:11. In this verse, the apostle Paul says, "For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ." This verse is unequivocal. The Church is built on Jesus himself. Since we know that the Word of God cannot contradict itself, we need to look more closely at the promise of Jesus to build on "this rock."

Remember that Jesus had asked his disciples, first what men were saying about him and then what they themselves said about his identity. "He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' Peter answered and said to Him, 'You are the Christ.'" Peter made what we call the good confession. He declared his faith in Jesus. Jesus first congratulated Peter on understanding this fundamental truth. Then he said, "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My Church." If Jesus had meant that he would build his Church on Peter, he would probably have said, "I tell you that you are Peter and that on you I will build my Church." But he seems to want to make a distinction between the apostle and "this rock" to which he referred. This distinction is felt more clearly in Greek, the language in which the New Testament was writ-

ten. In Greek, Jesus uses two words that are related but distinct from each other. He says, "And I also say to you that you are petros, and on this petra I will build My Church..." Now the word *petros*, which is masculine, refers to a stone or rock which can be held in the hand or used to build a wall. The word *petra*, which is feminine, refers to a boulder or a bedrock on which one could construct a whole building. One translation of the Bible tries to bring this out by translating the verse, "I say to you that you are Peter and that on this rock foundation I will build my Church."

So what would this rock be, about which Jesus speaks and which serves as the foundation of the Church? It is the fact that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior promised by God for centuries. All authority belongs to him. He lives forever. And all the hope of his Church is found in him. If he is not the anointed of God, the Messiah himself, the Church has no victory over death. If he is in fact the Christ, nothing will be able to destroy it. It will enjoy an eternal glory.

WHAT IS PETER'S ROLE?

But if the Church is not built on the apostle Peter, what is the role of this man? What authority did Jesus give him when he said, "And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19)?

To understand this verse, let's go step by step. Let us notice first the expression "kingdom of heaven." The other gospels speak more often of the kingdom of God, but Matthew follows the Jewish custom of placing, in respect for the divine name, another word in place of God. The kingdom of heaven or kingdom of God corresponds to the Church of which Jesus had just spoken. To enter the kingdom, one must be born of water and of the spirit (John 3:1-5). The kingdom was to come during the lifetime of the apostles of Jesus (Mark 9:1). Paul said to the Christians of Colossae that God "conveyed us into the kingdom of the Son of His love." John said in Revelation 1:6 that Jesus had made of us Christians "a kingdom." The Church is this kingdom. We enter by the new birth, at baptism. It came in the lifetime

of the apostles, on the day of Pentecost. And we are added to it by the Lord who saved us (Acts 2:47).

So Jesus promised to give to Peter the keys of the kingdom, of this Church. What purpose does a key serve? To open or close, to give or refuse access. Jesus uses the word "key" in this way in Luke 11:52: "Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter in yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered." How did Peter use the keys of the kingdom to open the doors of the Church? On the day of Pentecost, he was the one who preached the Gospel for the first time. He spoke of the life, the death and the resurrection of Jesus, and when the crowd asked what must be done, Acts 2:38 tells us, "Then Peter said to them, 'Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.'" Three thousand Jews obeyed this exhortation, and the Church of Christ was born. Later, in Acts 10, it was again Peter who preached for the first time to non-Jews. This was in the house of Cornelius. Acts 15:7,8 says: "And when there had been much dispute, Peter rose up and said to them: 'Men and brethren, you know that a good while ago God chose among us, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us.'"

As for the right to bind or loose, it is a matter of declaring compulsory or of exempting from a

duty. In Matthew 23:4, Jesus accuses the scribes and Pharisees of having bound heavy burdens and of having put them on the shoulders of men. They had made all sorts of religious duties mandatory, duties which, in fact, were nothing but human traditions. Peter would have the authority to tell the people what God required of them, and what they were no longer obligated to do. But notice carefully that this same authority was given by the Lord to all the apostles. He told them in Matthew 18:18, "Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." All the apostles communicated by inspiration the will of God for men in the Christian era. The distinction of Peter would be the fact that he was to have the privilege of being the first to preach the Gospel and the conditions of salvation, first to the Jews, and later to the Gentiles, just as he was the first to confess that Jesus was the Christ.

CONCLUSION

So Jesus promised to build his Church on the truth that Peter confessed. Jesus is himself the founder of this one and only Church, he is its foundation and he is its only head. Everything is based on him. And when it comes to your salvation, everything depends on your decision about him. As he asked his disciples, nearly two thousand years ago, he asks you today, "And you, who do you say that I am?"