

The Template for the Church

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Established by Revelation

The word “church” only appears twice in the four gospels, both times used by Jesus in the book of Matthew. It is the English translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*, which means “a calling out.”¹ In ancient Greek life it referred to “a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place; an assembly.”² *Ekklesia* appears 118 times in the New Testament, where it is translated “church” 115 times and “assembly” 3 times. The word itself does not have holy connotations. There is, however, a unique *ekklesia* of Jesus Christ—a distinct group of people called out of this world to Him. From now on I will refer to this *ekklesia* as the “church,” but please keep in mind that the real meaning of the word “church” has been grossly distorted today. When I sense my teaching conflicts with this distortion, I will often refer to the church as the “true, real, genuine or invisible” church, to reinforce this critical understanding.

Caesarea Philippi is the location of giant rock formation wherein lies the entrance to a large cave that was believed to be the gates to Hades in ancient times. This was the symbolic backdrop from where Jesus first referred to His church:

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*. 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. 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.” Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ. (Matthew 16:13-20; *emphasis mine*)

The people were saying that Jesus was just another prophet, while God was revealing that He was indeed the Messiah. Here we have the beginning of the church, founded on the revelation of Jesus Christ. Its design and function comes exclusively from God and not man (“flesh and blood”).

Jesus symbolically changed Simon’s name to Peter after God revealed to Him who Jesus was. He subsequently declared, “on this rock I will build my church...” This is the same Rock of the Old Testament that was a symbolic reference to the Messiah.³ The Greek word translated “Peter” here is *petros*, which is used for a smaller stone or rock, and “rock” is *petra*, which is generally used for a large rock (boulder), foundation stone, or cliff (like the cliff-like formation overshadowing Caesarea Philippi).⁴ Jesus was not saying He was going to build His church upon Peter. He was announcing that He was going to build His church on the revelation knowledge of Himself, the

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chief cornerstone (see Psalm 118:22 and Isaiah 28:16). Peter himself made this clear in his own teaching:

As you come to him [Jesus Christ], a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, 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. For it stands in Scripture: “Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” (1 Peter 2:4-6)

It was through this revelation that Peter became an apostle—a builder of men up into Christ.

Simon in his humanity alone was not able to start or build the church, but Peter was through the revelation given to him. This subtle transition is important to grasp, because growth in the true church only comes through God’s revelation. It does not grow through man’s decisions, ways, and ideals.

Simon also began the process of partaking in the divine nature through this revelation. His name change to Peter, which holds similar meaning to that of the Rock, reflects this. He would later teach this process in detail in his second epistle (2 Peter 1). Jesus builds upon that which reflects His name (His character or person).

Jesus told Peter, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven . . .” Keys are symbolic of the authority to open or shut (keep locked) the door to something.⁵ This is interesting, given that Jesus also said: “I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture” (John 10:9). Jesus was giving Peter the authority to open or shut the door to His gospel.

In his teaching series, *The Life of the Messiah from a Jewish Perspective*, Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum points out that it was Peter who had the role of opening the door for all three people groups (Jews, Samaritans, and Gentiles). After the Holy Spirit was given on the day of Pentecost, it was his preaching that opened the door for the Jews (see Acts 2). Philip’s preaching of Christ to the Samaritans did not lead to the baptism of the Spirit for them, because he did not have the key. Afterward the apostles in Jerusalem sent Peter (and John) there to pray and lay hands on them (see Acts 8). Paul was commissioned as an apostle to the gentiles but he did not have the key. Peter opened the door for the gentiles when he preached the gospel to Cornelius and his family and friends and the Holy Spirit fell on them (see Acts 10).

Apostolic Structure

Jesus introduced the apostolic structure of the church here as Peter was to be the leader of the first 12 apostles. Yet, Jesus said to Peter, “I will build my church.” Apostles are servants chosen by God to spearhead what Christ Himself is doing. They are not in control. Consider what Jesus told His disciples elsewhere:

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But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers. And call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven. Neither be called instructors, for you have one instructor, the Christ. (Matthew 23:8-10)

But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. *It shall not be so among you.* But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matthew 20:25-28; *emphasis mine*)

One cannot choose to be an apostle, neither can one go to some religious institution to become one. This is why the apostle Paul referred to himself as, “an apostle—not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead—” and as an “apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.”⁶ Note that Jesus chose Peter, a fisherman, to lead His church and not Nicodemus, an expert in Jewish law. Do not misunderstand me, an apostle can go to a Bible school or be a scholar (like the apostle Paul), however, a Bible school cannot produce an apostle or any other church leader.

Apostles are conduits—primarily through teaching—for the Head of the church, Jesus, to reveal Himself to man. The apostle Paul described this relationship in his first letter to the Corinthian church:

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God’s fellow workers. You are God’s field, God’s building.

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. (1 Corinthians 3:5-11)

The Creator of the heavens and the earth—the visible, physical realm—has also created the invisible realm (to man at least). Using agriculture and construction as analogies, Paul laid out aspects here of the design of the invisible operation of Christ and His church. Such comparisons of God’s relationship with His people Israel, using agricultural symbolism, are abundant in the Old Testament.⁷

Divine Growth

Nature—having come forth from the same Designer—provides an excellent illustration for how the Lord grows His people up in the divine nature (to bear the fruit of the Spirit). The earth is like a garden created by God for the purpose of growing various plants. The plants come from seeds

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containing all the information needed to grow them. They were predesigned with this information. Also in the unseen (or microscopic) realm, there are scientific processes designed by God through which they grow from a seed and reproduce. In the physical realm, heat, light, water, and nutrients are required to grow the plant to its fruit bearing capacity. Other outside physical elements, such as cold and wind, make the plants stronger.

Those who hear the gospel and believe in Jesus Christ receive the Holy Spirit and are baptized in His name (His person and character). When they first receive the Spirit it is as if a seed containing the information of the divine nature of God is planted in them. The ongoing teaching of the Spirit will establish the obedient believer in Christ. Apostles are like gardeners who tend to this growth process—the Spirit teaching through them. They bring nothing of value in the physical realm to this growth process (“neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything”), for it is only the Spirit within them that is valuable. The Designer is the one who actually grows and establishes the plants that resemble His character and bear His fruit.

Finally, there is Jesus’s description of this process:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:1-5)

This *true vine life* is the hallmark of my ministry.

Paul warned us to be careful how we build. The response of each individual to the Holy Spirit determines if and how they grow. Only that which is of Christ will have any eternal value, as Jesus Himself taught:

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who *built his house on the rock*. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house, but it did not fall, *because it had been found on the rock*. And everyone who hears these words of mine and does not do them will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand. And the rain fell, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell, and great was the fall of it. (Matthew 7:24-27; *emphasis mine*)

One needs to hear and do what Jesus says to be firmly established in the divine nature. It is on this Rock that Jesus builds His church.

Conclusion

The church that Jesus started is not one that came from man, neither is it to be built by man. Jesus said, “I will build my church”. It is his. He designed it. He controls it. Only he can build it. It was

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designed to only be built on the rock—the revelation knowledge of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit indwells and teaches those who receive Jesus so that they may be like him and live the life He reveals to them. The true church is built as present day disciples live the lives He reveals to them. It is not a building or a religious group. It is simply the people who have received this revelation from God and, like Simon turned to Peter, have found a new life because of it. They have been called out of the world's system to follow Christ.

Endnotes

1. Strong's Concordance #1577
2. Thayer's Greek Lexicon; see Acts 19:32-41
3. Deuteronomy 32:4 and 2 Samuel 23:3 are examples of this
4. The "great stone" rolled in front of Jesus' tomb was a *petra*.
5. See Isaiah 22:22 and Revelation 1:18
6. Galatians 1:1 and Colossians 1:1
7. God declared concerning Israel, 'Yet I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed.' (Jeremiah 2:21a) Asaph, the psalmist, sang:

You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it; it took deep root and filled the land. ... Turn again, O God of hosts! Look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted, and for the son whom you made strong for yourself. They have burned it with fire; they have cut it down; may they perish at the rebuke of your face! But let your hand be on the man of your right hand, the son of man whom you have made strong for yourself! (Psalm 80:8-9, 14-17)

Isaiah prophesied concerning the ministry of the Messiah: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; ... that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified. (Isaiah 61:1-3)