

TheoCenTriC

Ravings of an amateur pastor, hack theologian, and wannabe mystic

"I Will Build My Church"

Recovering Our Identity by Reclaiming Jesus' Mission

Most organizations have mission statements to clarify goals, provide direction, and shape the values of their respective corporate endeavor. Because a mission statement is a valuable tool for maintaining perspective, many people have drafted their own personal mission statement in order to clarify their own goals and provide direction for their lives.

Jesus possessed a personal mission statement. This mission statement declared his goals, values, and purpose in life. What was Jesus' mission statement? "I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). The end result of Jesus' life-work would be the creation of a messianic community of people who personally identified with Jesus *and* with one another.

Contrary to our contemporary emphasis on the ultimate and exclusive value of a "personal relationship with Jesus" our Lord prominently emphasized the corporate dimension of his mission. Western individualism shapes our religious beliefs more than we often recognize, and in this case, it nearly blinds us to Jesus' mission. Jesus' goal was not to establish a personal relationship with individual people who have no relationship to one another. Instead, Jesus' goal was the creation of a people in peaceful relationship with God *and* with one another. In other words, Jesus' mission was to create a community.

Devotion to Christ necessarily involves devotion to Christ's mission. Though this is hard to hear in our individualistic culture of made-to-order religion, we cannot be completely devoted to Christ without complete devotion to his mission. We are called to become like Christ. We cannot be like Christ - sharing his heart and interests - without loving his bride, the church.

Jesus loves the church, warts and all. "Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her" (Ephesians 5:25). She is not without sin. She still suffers the stains of depravity and yet, out of love, Christ patiently and carefully cleanses his bride (Ephesians 5:26-27). If we are to have the heart of Christ, we must also display the same patient love and care for Christ's church. The church is not perfect, yet she is at the heart of Christ's passionate love.

The Church's Identity Crisis

Failure to recognize our need to be devoted to Christ's mission has led to an identity crisis in the church. Who are we? Why do we meet together? Does anything of value happen while we are together? The loss of a corporate identity has left the church powerless to carry out Christ's mission. For many evangelical Christians, the church is an optional add-on - a mere accessory - to their personal relationship with Christ. It is helpful at times, but ultimately unnecessary to godly Christian living. Sadly, it is often considered an outright hindrance to an authentic relationship to God.

Contemporary evangelicals tend to think of the church as a shopping mall, rather than as a hospital where healing takes place, or a military outpost where soldiers discipline themselves to combat evil, or a family gathering where blood relatives express devotion through thick and thin in all stages of life. For many people, the church provides a smorgasbord of religious goods and services that can be sampled at one's own convenience and used if they happen to be of personal benefit. There is no sense of obligation to anyone but themselves.

When people approach the church as needy customers rather than as self-denying disciples, their goal will be to take rather than to give. They come to church, not with a sense of mission, but a sense of need. The self and its needs rather than God and his glory become the focus. Comment cards are filled out with selfish comments such as: "I didn't get anything out of the service," or "I wasn't fed." The end result involves moving on to the next religious smorgasbord until its options are also exhausted. This emphasis on consuming religion leaves people with little sense of commitment or devotion to one another. Hungering for the real meat of authentic community yet unwilling to put in the demanding effort necessary to really experience community, many Christians end up leaving church life altogether. In doing so, they cut themselves off from participating in Christ's mission to build his church.

Christians in the early church did not experience such disillusion. Sure, they had their share of problems, but they certainly understood that devotion to Christ *and* devotion to one another were inseparable. Christ was building his church and Christ expected them to play a part in it. If they were to participate in God's mission through Christ in the Spirit they had to share in the common life of fellow believers.

We must recapture a sense of mission, purpose, and identity. The church is both a product of Christ's mission and the people of Christ's mission. Everything about the church exists because of Christ's mission to build a spiritual community of faithful disciples. For this reason, an apt descriptive term for the church is "missional." Out of devotion to Christ, the creation and maintenance of a missional church is necessary. This means that past paradigms must be rejected and new models considered.

In the past, we consigned missions to specially trained professionals - missionaries - who eventually departed for far away lands. Since the professionals were doing missions in remote lands far, far away, we could settle down and take it easy in our own local communities. This model is no longer valid (if it ever was in the first place). If we are to be missional, we must realize that the mission field is here, around us, in everything we do. We are the missionaries. The entire church has a responsibility to fulfill Christ's mission. Instead of relegating missions to a small faction of the church known as "missionaries" or the "missions committee" we must see mission as a vital aspect of our daily existence. We exist for the purpose of mission. Everything we do must lead to the fulfillment of the mission. Therefore, we must be *missional* in all we do!

Having considered the centrality of Christ's mission and the importance of our devotion to it, let's consider Christ's mission in context from Matthew 16:13-20.

Peter's Confession

After almost three years of participating in Jesus' public ministry, the disciples escaped the crowds on a private retreat with Jesus. Though the cross was only six months away, Jesus had said very little to his disciples about his upcoming sufferings. This would soon change. Jesus would prepare his disciples by regularly reminding them of his upcoming betrayal, rejection, crucifixion and resurrection (Matthew 16:21). Before this, however, he asked the disciples to comment on people's perspective of him.

Jesus began with a general question addressed to the public's perception of him: "Who do people say the son of man is?" (Matthew 16:13-14) Jesus' favorite self-designation was "son of man." The title was purposefully ambiguous and obscure. In Jesus' day it did not possess a ready-made content, leaving it open for interpretation.

Jesus' disciples responded by conveying that the growing consensus of the crowds was that Jesus was in the same camp as one of the great prophets of old. All the individuals mentioned - John the Baptist, Elijah, and Jeremiah - fit into this category. For any other person, this would be a flattering assessment. Jesus is positioned with some of the great names of faith. Yet this assessment is woefully inadequate. Certainly the crowd's conclusion was correct - Jesus was a prophet - but it was incomplete. Jesus was more than a prophet.

Jesus was probably well aware of what others thought about him. He was not seeking information with his first question. He was setting his disciples up to give their own personal assessment of Jesus in light of popular opinion. They had observed him for almost three years. What was their conception of him? Jesus asked, "But who do you say that I am? What do you - my special disciples - personally think?" (Matthew 16:15)

Peter's response is the earliest confession of the Christian faith, a confession that revolves around the identity of Jesus (Matthew 16:16). In this confession, three major Christological titles are brought together - Son of Man, Son of God, and Messiah. The significance of each title would expand in the future. Two events - Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection - would place his whole life in a totally new perspective, shedding light on the seminal truth contained in Peter's primitive expression. In other words, what Peter proclaims here is true (the result of the Father's blessing), but Peter at this point has no sense of the great significance of what he professes. This is underscored by Peter's satanically-inspired statement in the very next paragraph.

"Son of man" obviously lays emphasis on Jesus' humanity, but much more is involved than this. It would have been apparent to all observers that Jesus was fully human! More significant than his humanity is how this phrase connects Jesus to the transcendent heavenly figure with human likeness (in opposition to the beasts) who inherits a kingdom from the "Ancient of Days" in Daniel's vision:

"I kept looking in the night visions,
And behold, with the clouds of heaven
One like a Son of Man was coming,
And He came up to the Ancient of Days
And was presented before Him.
And to Him was given dominion,
Glory and a kingdom,
That all the peoples, nations, and people of every language
Might serve Him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion
Which will not pass away;
And His kingdom is one
Which will not be destroyed." (Daniel 7:13-14)

"Son of God" points to Jesus' deity, but again the reality is more nuanced. This would not have been the Apostles' pre-resurrection understanding of the term. In the Old Testament, the phrase does not refer to deity, but to an individual's special role or relationship to God as God's special representative (e.g., 2 Samuel 7:14; Psalm 2:7). Outside of Jewish literature, the phrase "Son of God" refers to deity. "Son of God" was a common title used by later Roman Caesars. The phrase was also used of famous philosophers, wise teachers, great warriors, or anyone who distinguished themselves in a special way. The Apostle John, writing later than all the other gospel writers, modified this phrase to highlight Jesus' uniqueness - "the only begotten," or "unique, one of a kind" Son of God.

"The Christ" means "the anointed one," and refers to the Jewish Messiah. In popular Jewish expectation, the Messiah would primarily play the role of nationalistic liberator wielding political might to judge the Gentiles. "'Messiah' would, for most ordinary Jews, have pointed to a coming king of the line of David, whom God would send to restore his people to national independence and to their rightful pre-eminence as the people of God" (R. T. France, *Matthew*, p.42).

When all three titles are put together - Son of Man, Son of God, the Messiah - we discover that Peter was essentially saying to Jesus, "You are the true king; the One Israel has waited for all these years!" Only later, in light of Jesus' death, resurrection, and ascension would the full significance of these titles become clear. Subsequently, the universal church's orthodox understanding of these titles amounts to a declaration that Jesus is fully God and fully man, God's unique redeemer from sin, death, Satan, and hell.

Peter was right in his opinion of Jesus. Jesus' blessing makes this clear: "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona." Peter's confession was a sign of God's favor upon Peter. The illumination necessary to make this confession was freely given to Peter by God: "My Father revealed this to you." Peter did not receive this insight naturally, through unaided human intellect, but by grace - through the touch of God's Spirit. Peter's confession completely accords with God's assessment of Jesus (cf. Matthew 3:17, 17:5). The same God who had declared, "This is my beloved Son" had given Peter the ability to recognize this truth in his own life.

If Peter was right, why would Jesus tell him and the rest of the disciples to keep this knowledge secret? This curious warning by Jesus is often labeled, "the messianic secret" (Matthew 16:20). The popular Jewish understanding of the role of messiah as violent nationalistic liberator was a misconception that Jesus would correct through his saving work at the cross. Using the title "messiah" before his crucifixion and resurrection would only foster misguided enthusiasm among the Jews and hinder Jesus' true mission. Even Peter had not yet grasped the true nature of Jesus' mission (Matthew 16:21-23). He expected popularity and triumph, not rejection and suffering.

Jesus would be a liberator, but not as commonly expected. He would liberate his people, not from the Roman Empire, Gentile culture, or Jewish renegades, but from the powers of evil - sin, death, demons, and hell. Jesus' mission is twofold: "He will save his people from their sins" (1:21) and "I will build my church." The latter builds upon the former, but the twofold mission is inseparable. Jesus' church is comprised of a liberated people, free from sin's bondage and tyranny, free to manifest God's kingdom upon the earth.

The disciples could not possibly understand Jesus' identity apart from the cross and subsequent resurrection. These two events would pour new meaning into the common term, "messiah," completely redefining it. Only in light of Jesus' death and resurrection would Jesus' followers have the ability to use this title without fear of misunderstanding. Yet the popular understanding was so pervasive that, even after the resurrection, the paradox of a crucified Messiah would prove a stumbling block for Jews (1 Corinthians 1:23).

The messianic secret would only be a secret during Jesus' earthly ministry. After his death, burial, resurrection, and ascension everything would change. The confession would no longer be a secret, but would become public domain - not only for the Jews, but for Gentiles as well: "Go into all the world..." (Matthew 28:18-20).

Jesus' Promises

Peter's confession is followed by three promises given to Jesus' disciples (Matthew 16:18-19).

"I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it." In his confession, Peter had correctly identified Jesus: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Now Christ returns the favor by making a declaration about Peter. "You are Peter (*Petros* - *Rocky*), and upon this rock (*petra*) I will build my church."

This is one of the most controversial passages in the entire Bible, not because of the difficulty in interpreting the passage, but because of the way different traditions use the text to support their theological positions. Two extremes must be rejected in order to clearly hear this passage as intended. "Roman Catholicism has read into these verses an elaborate doctrine of Papal succession and infallibility based on a supposed investiture of Peter with exclusive authority and status. Protestants have responded by downplaying Peter's importance and pivotal role by these texts" (Larry Chouinard, *Matthew*, p.297).

Is the rock Peter, as Roman Catholics argue? Or is the rock simply Peter's confession, as Protestants advocate? It is my contention that many Catholics read too much into the text while Protestants don't read what is clearly there. The rock is Peter. But the rock is Peter precisely because of his confession. Put

simply, the rock is Peter, the confessor. To admit this is *not* to give full assent to Roman Catholic dogma. The text says nothing about exclusive authority given to Peter alone. Nor does the text make any explicit claims about Peter's successors or papal infallibility. While rejecting Catholic dogma we must not reject what the text clearly states - the rock is Peter, the confessor.

Most evangelicals agree with this assessment. Consider the four quotes from four undeniably evangelical Protestants:

"It is only Protestant overreaction to the Roman Catholic claim (which of course has no foundation in the text), that what is here said of Peter applies also to the later bishops of Rome, that has led some to claim that the 'rock' here is not Peter at all but the faith which he has just confessed. The word-play, and the whole structure of the passage, demands that this verse is every bit as much Jesus' declaration about Peter as v. 16 was Peter's declaration about Jesus." (R. T. France, *Matthew*, p.254)

"Jesus, then, is promising Peter that he is going to build his church on him! I accept this view." (William Hendriksen, *Matthew*, p.647)

"Yet if it were not for Protestant reactions against extremes of Roman Catholic interpretation, it is doubtful whether many would have taken 'rock' to be anything or anyone other than Peter." (D. A. Carson, *Matthew*, p.368)

"In the original setting... it makes little sense to take the rock as anything but Peter himself." (Craig Blomberg, *Matthew*, p.278)

Peter's new name does not describe Peter's character (he is anything but rock-like in stability or reliability). The new name reflects his role as the foundation-stone of Jesus' church.

Peter's preeminence is without equal in the early Christian church. He is the most prominent disciple in the Gospels, playing the part of the chief spokesman for the Apostles. He was the first disciple Jesus called. He is first in every listing of the twelve disciples. He was the first witness of the resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:5). He is singled out in the Gospel of John as the one who is to feed the sheep of Jesus' flock. He was the first preacher at Pentecost. He was the first called to reach out to the Gentiles with the gospel. He was the first person the Apostle Paul sought after his conversion (Galatians 1:18). Certainly, Peter's place as the chief representative of Christ's disciples is firmly established in the Holy Scriptures.

Peter is unique, yet he is also so typical, so ordinary. In his ordinariness, he represents Christians with average strengths and common weaknesses who strive, yet often fail, to be loyal followers of Christ. His ordinariness is revealed in the very next paragraph. His blessed confession ("You are the Christ") is followed by a satanic blunder ("God forbid it! You shall not suffer and die"). He affirms the faith but fails to understand all its ramifications.

Peter is uniquely important in his unrepeatable role as the foundation of Jesus' church just as Abraham was uniquely important in his unrepeatable role as the foundation of the Jewish church. The faith we hold is the faith of Peter, the faith he professed, and the faith he preserved and passed down to the church.

We believe what we believe because of apostolic witness. We confess with the Nicene Creed, "We believe in the one holy catholic and apostolic church." What we believe is not based on actual experience of Jesus but on the apostolic testimony of Peter and the Apostles. We believe they are trustworthy witnesses who speak truth about Jesus with spiritual authority given by God's grace.

The early church recognized this apostolic authority:

"And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." (Acts 2:42)

"And for this reason we constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe." (1 Thessalonians 2:13)

"So then, brethren, stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us." (2 Thessalonians 2:15).

We believe what we have received, not what we have personally invented or discovered on our own. We believe what the Apostles have delivered, the tradition they have passed down.

The church is built on the foundation of Peter and his confession, but ultimately, Jesus - not Peter - is the builder and owner of the church. It is "His church." By speaking of "my church" Jesus proclaims he is establishing a new messianic community. In the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures) the Greek, *ekklesia*, translates the Hebrew, *qahal* which is translated "congregation" or "community" in the Old Testament. What Yahweh was to the *ekklesia* - Israel - in the Old Covenant, Jesus is to the *ekklesia* - Christians - in the New Covenant. This is the significance of the number twelve. Jesus' choice of twelve disciples would not go unnoticed in his day. It was a highly symbolic gesture. By choosing twelve disciples, Jesus presents himself as the New Jacob, the new Israel, and his disciples as the twelve patriarchs forming the new people of God.

This further emphasizes the great significance of Jesus' personal claim to possession - "my church." "What is striking is not so much the idea of 'building a community' [we should expect the Messiah to have a Messianic community], but the boldness of Jesus' description of it as *my* community, rather than God's." (R. T. France, *Matthew*, p.255). Jesus is claiming something radical - the new community is His possession. This community has the full approval of the Father as indicated by Jesus' statement to Peter: "My Father has revealed this to you." What was identified as Yahweh's community in the Old Testament is now, with God's full blessing, considered Yeshua's (Jesus') community in the New. This is quite a claim, indeed a blasphemous claim, if Jesus is not God!

The second great promise is this: "The gates of Hades shall not overpower it." "Gates" can refer to either (1) fortifications against attack or (2) partitions to keep something in. The "gates" represent the power of death in refusing to give up its own, and the spiritual strength of the power of evil, headed by Satan and his cohorts. The church is not exempt from Satan's onslaughts but it will never finally be overcome by the greatest power at the demon's call - death.

Being uniquely identified with Jesus brings great victory but also great danger. "Yet this passage also instructs us, that so long as the Church shall continue to be a pilgrim on the earth, she will never enjoy rest, but will be exposed to many attacks; for, when it is declared that Satan will not conquer, this implies that he will be her constant enemy" (John Calvin). Though the enemy rages, his every attempt will be foiled. The church will ever rise anew to crush the serpent's head, for she, in union with her Lord, cannot ultimately be defeated by the hosts of darkness. "Against all the power of Satan the firmness of the Church will prove to be invincible, because the truth of God, on which the faith of the Church rests, will ever remain unshaken" (John Calvin).

The third promise: "I will give you the keys to the kingdom." Peter is not given a "key" but "keys." Peter is not simply the doorkeeper of the "pearly gates," controlling admission to heaven. The keys signify delegated authority and stewardship regulating the administration of another (cf. Isaiah 22:22, 15). The issue is not admission to the church, but a delegated authority to make God's kingdom available to the world - a stewardship of God's affairs on earth. Peter, representing Jesus, is responsible to bring God's heavenly kingdom to bear on matters pertaining to the church.

"Whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." "Whatever" (not "whoever") refers to things, not to people or entities. "Bind and loose" is a Jewish technical term for the pronouncements of Rabbis on what was or was not permitted (to "bind" was to forbid, to "loose" was to permit, cf. Matthew 23:4). Peter is given the authority to make decisions about what is forbidden and what is permitted, what is binding on disciples and what can be loosed. Since

the confession is not Peter's alone, this authority resides with the entire church who hold to Peter's confession.

The point that shouldn't be missed is this: The doors of God's Kingdom are opened wide by the proclamation of the gospel summarized in the confession! Eternal life is available to all who embrace Jesus as Son of God, Son of Man, the Messiah. Through faithful witness in word and deed, the church of God brings heaven to earth, the kingdom to the world. In this way, we become "fishers of men" (4:19), "salt and light" (5:13-16), "disciples who preach the good news of the kingdom" (10:6-42). In this way we obey the climactic missionary mandate given at the end of Matthew's gospel (28:18-20).

Recovering Our Identity

This foundational passage sheds light on the nature of Jesus' church. We learn who we are, whose we are, what we are, why we are here, and what our destiny is.

One People: A Community. The church at its most fundamental level is a community. An individual believer is not the church. The reality is far greater than a "personal relationship with God." Jesus' mission was not simply to create a multitude of personal relationships with detached individuals, but to create a new community of faithful followers. The life of faith is life of community.

One Spirit: A God-Graced Community. The church is graced by God. We are not here because we are smarter, more intellectual, or more spiritually-sensitive than others. We are here because we have been graced by God and given the gift of illumination through God's Spirit to understand and embrace the gospel of Christ. We are here as a result of God's gift. Subsequently, we are God's gifts to one another.

One Faith: A Common Confession concerning Christ. Peter's confession is the first truly Christian confession. It is not the last. The confession develops throughout the New Testament and into early church history. Beginning with the simple counter-cultural phrase "Jesus is Lord" (and not Caesar) the creed developed into more expanded statements (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:1-3; 1 Timothy 3:16). Ultimately the core content of the gospel message was developed in the Apostles and Nicene Creed. We are united around a common confession, not common circumstances. The gospel removes former distinctions (Jew, Greek, free, slave, male, female) and creates a community of believers. Neither race, class, sex, education, nor personal tastes have any ultimate significance in regard to participation in the community. "Therefore from now on we recognize no one according to the flesh; even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know him thus no longer. Therefore if any one is in Christ - new creation! The old has passed away; behold, new things have come" (2 Corinthians 5:16-17).

One Hope: Triumphant over All Evil Powers. There is no greater power in the cosmos. No institution, organism, or group will last as long as Christ's church. The church participates in an eternal, unstoppable, irreversible, and glorious reality. The ultimate triumph over all evil powers is the destiny of the church.

One Calling: Stewards/Messengers of God's Kingdom. We have an awesome privilege and responsibility. We must discharge our task with sobriety and joy. We must be committed! We hold the "keys to the kingdom." We are God's instrument to convey his good news to the world. The church is not the kingdom, but a sign of the kingdom. We demonstrate to the world, through word and deed, that God's redemptive work is already active in the world. God is at work in and through the church.

We share a common origin (*grace*), common confession (*Jesus is Messiah*), common stewardship (*keys of the kingdom*), and common destiny (*triumphant victory over all evil powers*). The ties that bind us together are strong - indeed, eternal!

The church is the only lasting thing in this world! When will we live as if this is true? It is hard to truly obey in this area - it is counter-cultural and sacrificial. It calls us to reject individualism as a reductionistic lie. Further, it calls us to radical commitment, devotion, sacrifice, forbearance, forgiveness, and love.

The gospel creates a church: "I will build my church." The church is an essential part of the gospel message. It is the fulfillment of Christ's mission. We can't be devoted to Christ without being devoted to His church. We are fooling ourselves if we think that we can.

Jesus' mission will be accomplished. Jesus will build his church. You are either part of this building project or you are not. You are either a product of His mission or stand outside of His mission - hindering rather than helping. Christ came to build his church - a new community, not just individual detached relationships. He's not doing it alone, but through his church. We can share in this great work by making Christ's mission our mission.

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