

## Chapter 12 – The Church & The Word of God

*But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman. . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (Galatians 4:4; John 1:14).*

When our Lord Jesus came, He did so not only to redeem us through His life of obedient love, but also to *teach* us – to reveal the Trinitarian Life of God and instruct us how to enter into that Life and live it out in this world. As Christians we affirm that He was (and is) the greatest teacher the world has ever known. I stand by that.

I can see where one might dispute it though. I mean, if the Lord Jesus was such a great teacher then why is it that we Christians can not agree on the meaning of His words or the content of His doctrine? For example, one group of Christians will teach that baptism is simply an outward sign of the Christian’s interior, saving faith. Another group will teach that the physical act of baptism is necessary for salvation. Those who confess the need for baptism are divided amongst themselves as to whether the baptized need to be fully immersed or if pouring and sprinkling of water are equally valid. Further, can infants be baptized, or must children wait until they have “reached the age of reason?” Surely the Son of God was capable of making His will on such matters known – and surely through the Holy Spirit He was able to mold the Apostles into capable teachers of others. If we in the twentieth century cannot agree on Christ’s doctrine then I have to believe that the fault, or deficiency, lies not with Christ but with us.

“How much easier it would have been if Jesus would have just sat down and written a catechism!” we may lament. And yet, the Lord did not leave us a single word in writing. I am not upset with Him over it, though; He has been in my life long enough for me to understand that He is Wisdom. If He chose not to write then, rest assured, He had good reason.

As God, Jesus knew what the future held for those who believed in Him. He was keenly aware that there would be doctrinal disputes, arguments, heresy. I have to trust that He wouldn’t leave His people to fend for themselves – individuals striving to make sense of it all through the passage of years, with our limited intellects, and still under-developed spiritual ears. The One Who said, “for this reason I was born, and for this I came into the world, to testify to the truth” (John 18:37, NIV), *would have* found a way, would have provided for His Beloved’s future. We have already said that

He did not write a book. Well, then what did He do? Let's look at Jesus' public ministry.

*Kingdom of the Word*

The proclamation of the Kingdom of God was the heart of Jesus' message. When the Angel Gabriel announced His birth to Mary he had said that, "the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there will be no end" (Luke 1:32-33). The gospels tell us that the initial theme of His preaching was "the kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe the good news" (Mark 1:15). Jesus was the prophesied King – and His Kingdom was about to be inaugurated. As we saw in Chapter 3, it would be the fulfillment of the Kingdoms of David and Solomon – not just a national kingdom but a global one, the "Israel of God" (Galatians 6:16), the Church.<sup>182</sup> His Kingdom was not to be solely a "spiritual" kingdom, an invisible brotherhood of the faithful. The Lord gave it a definite, visible structure.

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<sup>182</sup> There are those who would wish to deny this identification of the "Kingdom" with the "Church." The Church, for them, is a social body of believers moving through time. The Kingdom, on the other hand, is that perfect reign of Christ occurring in heaven and breaking through to earth only at the end of history. I maintain, however, that such a distinction ignores the way Jesus used the terms Church and Kingdom interchangeably in Matthew 16:18-19 as well as how He spoke of His Kingdom containing sinners (see Matthew 13:47-48; 13:24-30; 25:1-12), something which would make no sense if the Kingdom refers only to the heavenly, or end-time, reign of Christ. That the Church on earth contains sinners is a foregone conclusion.

I believe that the answer lies in seeing the Church on earth as transitional, the Kingdom awaiting its full-flowering. It *is* the Kingdom already present *but in seed form*. Those of us who belong to it are full citizens, but our citizenship is forfeitable. It's only those in heaven who enjoy the Kingdom in its fullness and are assured that they have won the fight against sin.

Perhaps someone may object, "But Christ said to Pilate, 'My kingship is not of this world' (John 18:36)." That verse does not invalidate what has been said thus far. Jesus' words can be understood by looking just a chapter earlier in John's Gospel. The Lord, when praying for the Apostles, said "I do not pray that thou shouldst take them *out* of the world, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one. *They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world*" (John 17:15-16, emphasis added). If Jesus and the Apostles can be *in* the world but not *of* the world then the same can be said of the Kingdom; it is physically present but its origins and mode of existence are not of this world system.

We are told that after a night of prayer Jesus called forth Twelve from His crowd of disciples and designated them as Apostles (Luke 6:12-13). The magnitude of such an action should not be lost on anyone familiar with the Old Testament. God's people under the Old Covenant were descended from the Twelve Sons of Jacob. In establishing this new "Israel of God" Jesus selected twelve new foundations (Ephesians 2:20; Revelations 21:14)<sup>183</sup> for God's covenant people.<sup>184</sup> They were to act as shepherds to their brothers and sisters (John 21:15-17) – and we know the length to which Jesus expected shepherds to go, "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (John 10:11). When Jesus first called them as ministers they could not have known that their Master would ascend to heaven only three years later, that He was training them for the role they would exercise after His departure. They were told how "the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them," and how "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" (Matthew 20:25-27).

In short, this was to be a Kingdom unlike *any* the world had ever seen. And this is because besides being a Kingdom, it was to be a Family – the very Family of God. Because of the saving action Jesus was to perform, a fallen race would have the chance to become sons and daughters of God. That is why our Lord taught His disciples to pray "Abba," or "Daddy," and that after His resurrection He could send Mary Magdalene to the Apostles with the message "I am ascending to *my* Father and *your* Father" (John 20:17; emphasis added). The unity between God and each of His children was so real that He said, "they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest" (Jeremiah 31:34). Jesus declared that each child of the Kingdom was to be "the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14). *The Book of Revelation* calls the new community a "kingdom, priests to his God and Father" (1:6).

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<sup>183</sup> *Ephesians 2:19-20*, "you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets" (emphasis added); *Revelation 21:12-14*, "[The wall of the New Jerusalem had] twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel...and the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb. "

<sup>184</sup> That Jesus was establishing a new Israel is also demonstrated by how, after choosing the Twelve, He chose seventy (many Bible manuscripts have seventy-two) other disciples whom He empowered to spread the word about Him and heal the sick. This parallels the Old Testament account of God ordaining seventy elders to assist Moses in serving His covenant people (Numbers 11:16-30).

The Family of God, the Kingdom of God; it is one and the same. Jesus was incorporating the Apostles into His Own mission – He the eldest brother molding them into “older brothers” to assist in the nurturing of the Family once He returned to the Father’s right hand. I shared earlier my conviction that the Church was to act as Christ’s visible and physical presence in the world; what I now realize is that the shepherds whom Christ raised up are meant to represent Christ in a uniquely visible way *within the Church* - as uniquely ordained servants to the rest of us.

This is not to say that they weren’t granted authority. It would have been impossible to carry out their mission as shepherds had they not. Imagine a parent trying to guide a child into adulthood without being granted authority by the Lord unto that end. Jesus had told those He sent, “He who hears you hears *me*, and he who rejects you rejects me” (Luke 10:16; emphasis added). I find it interesting that the early Christians looked to the Apostles not just as older brothers but as *father figures* (2 Corinthians 6:13).

In His Kingdom upon earth Jesus knew that His people wouldn’t always act like angels. It wasn’t without reason that He taught us to pray, “Your Kingdom come. . . on earth as it is in heaven!” In Jesus’ parables He warned the Apostles that His Kingdom on earth would contain both the virtuous and the wicked. His Church would be like a net containing both good and bad fish [Matthew 13:47-48], a field containing both wheat and cockle [Matthew 13:24-30], ten virgins – five with oil in their lamps and five without [Matthew 25:1-12]. Thus, the Twelve were given authority to declare actions allowable or disallowable for members of the community, “Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 18:18). The same terminology was used by the rabbis of Jesus’ day, and referred to their authority to declare this or that action as allowable under, or in violation of, divine law.<sup>185</sup> This power of “binding and loosing” would have been understood by the first Christians as applying to even purely disciplinary measures (like when to fast, etc.); after all, Jesus had said “*whatever* you bind. . .”

Jesus empowered the Twelve to help the erring members of the Church. They were instructed that when one brother had wronged another,

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<sup>185</sup> Jaki, Stanley, *And on This Rock: Witness of One Land and Two Covenants* (), p.43.

and the offender refused to repent, the matter was to be referred “to the Church.” “If he refuses to listen *even to the church*, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector” (Matthew 18:17). In other words, it would be time for “tough love” from the shepherds. St. Paul referred to this action of putting someone outside the Church as “delivering [him] to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” Paul’s hope was that exclusion from the Body would force the offender to recognize the danger unrepentant serious sin posed, and elicit a change (See 1 Corinthians 5:4-5). As we saw in our discussion of Reconciliation, Jesus had entrusted the Apostles with an enormous responsibility: “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (John 20:23).

#### *A Shepherd to the Shepherds*

Among the Twelve the Lord chose Simon (Peter) to hold a special position. After Christ’s resurrection and ascension he would be a shepherd to the shepherds. Simon was marked for the position after his profession of faith at Caesarea Philippi, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God” in the face of the other Apostles’ silence. What Jesus said to Simon at that time bears careful examination. We will look at *Matthew 16:17-19*, in sections, beginning with:

Blessed are you Simon Bar Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter [Petros in Greek] and on this rock [petra in Greek] I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.

I have already noted an objection to the Catholic understanding of this verse (that Simon-Peter is the rock on whom Christ’s Church is built) by a Baptist campus minister. When looked at by some of the best Protestant biblical scholars in the world, however, his objection doesn’t hold water.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>186</sup>Scott Hahn presents the findings of Herman Ridderbos, R.T. France, W.F. Albright, Gerhard Maier, and Donald Carson in his audiocassette *Holy Father: The Pope* (St. Joseph’s Communications), the transcript of which is available at <

<http://www.star.ucl.ac.uk/~vgg/rc/aplgc/hahn/m4/pp.html>>.

A more in-depth look at the scholarship on Jesus’ words to Simon, can be found in Butler, Scott; Norman Dalgren, & David Hess (Eds.), *Jesus, Peter & the Keys: A Scriptural Handbook*

The reason for Matthew's Gospel, in Greek, using two different words (Petros and *petra*) is surprisingly simple. Anyone who studied French or Spanish in high school will undoubtedly remember that these languages have masculine and feminine nouns; you can tell which gender a given word is by checking the word ending. The same holds true in Greek. "Petra," or "massive rock," is a feminine noun and thus has a feminine ending. It would have been improper to give the name to Simon; when applied to him the ending had to be changed, and thus we see "Petros" instead of "petra." Now "Petros" just happened to be an already existing word, which in ancient Greek poetry was used to denote "pebble." By the time of Jesus, however, "Petros" had lost this restrictive meaning and could be used interchangeably with "petra." to denote a "massive rock."<sup>187</sup>

Thus far I have been discussing Jesus' words as found in the Greek of *Matthew's Gospel*. We have to remember, though, that *Jesus would not have spoken those words in Greek*. The everyday speech of a Palestinian Jew was Aramaic. (Hebrew was spoken but reserved for religious ceremony.) Jesus' use of Aramaic is attested to in the gospels. We hear it in the *Our Father* – "Abba" is Aramaic, not Hebrew or Greek. *Matthew* and *Mark* record the Aramaic cry from the cross, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani" (Matthew 27:46). So when Jesus made His statement to Simon He would not have used the

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*on the Papacy* (Santa Barbara, California: Queenship Publishing Company, 1997) For example:

Gerhard Kittel's *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (1968) is cited, "Petros himself is the *petra*, not just his faith or his confession...The idea of the Reformers that He is referring to the faith of Peter is quite inconceivable" (p.31); Craig Blomberg, a Baptist scholar and Professor of New Testament at Denver Seminary says, "Peter's name (*Petros*) and the word 'rock' (*petra*) makes sense only if Peter is the rock and if Jesus is about to explain the significance of this identification" (p.32); R.T. France, a renowned Anglican scholar, in his *The Gospel According to Matthew* (1985) wrote that, "The feminine word for rock, *petra*, is necessarily changed to the masculine *petros* (stone) to give a man's name, but the word-play is unmistakable (and in Aramaic would be even more so, as the same form *kepha* would occur in both places)...it is to Peter, not to his confession, that the rock metaphor is applied. And it is of course a matter of historic fact that Peter was the acknowledged leader of the group of disciples, and of the developing church in its early years" (p.36).

<sup>187</sup> James Akin in *Surprised By Truth*. Patrick Madrid ed. Basilica Press, San Diego. p.68

Greek word “Petros,” but the Aramaic “Kepha;” and “Kepha” can *only mean* “massive stone.”

I can say this with certainty because of how the rest of the New Testament bears this out. We see Simon referred to not just as Peter (Petros), but as *Cephas* – the Aramaic *Kepha* spelled with the Greek alphabet.<sup>188</sup> *John’s Gospel* shows this clearly: “So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas (which means Peter)” (1:42). Paul always referred to Simon as “Cephas” (see 1 Corinthians 1:12, 3:22, 9:5, and Galatians 2:9, 11, 14).

Now all these linguistic gymnastics are meant only to bring out the true meaning of Jesus’ words to Simon. He promised a weak, rash man that he would be transformed by grace into the unique foundation of His Church. Some believers still have difficulty accepting this, objecting that Christ is the *true* Rock (1 Corinthians 10:4). And to this objection Simon-Peter, the current pope, and the Catholic Church would all answer “Amen!” Simon could become the rock on whom the Church is built *only because Christ is the Rock on whom Simon-Peter stands*. Simon being allowed to share in Christ’s “Rockness” is not without precedent: We human beings are allowed to share in God’s act of creating new lives; our participation does not mean that we supplant Him as *the* Creator. If I am a good teacher it is only because of the One Teacher (Matthew 23:10); if someone is wise it is because of the One Who *is* Wisdom. And if Simon became the rock, Kepha/ Cephas/ Peter, it is only because Christ made him so. To recognize someone as a parent, or wise, or a good teacher, is not a denial of God the Father or Christ’s fullness and neither is calling Peter the Rock. We are only echoing the Lord; He was the One Who renamed Simon!

Turning back to our passage, we hear Jesus promise, “and on this rock I will build my church.” Notice that it is Christ Who builds the Church, the Kingdom. Peter plays a part. The Apostles play a part; every Christian plays a part. But ultimately the growth of the Church is a supernatural process carried out by the Lord Jesus Himself.<sup>189</sup> And “the powers of death [also translated “gates of Hades”] shall not prevail against it” (16:18). Some interpret this to mean that the Church will not be overcome by any of Satan’s

<sup>188</sup> The technical term for this is *transliteration*.

<sup>189</sup> *1 Corinthians* 3:7-9, “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 equal, and each shall receive his wages according to his labor. For we are God’s fellow workers, you are God’s field, God’s building.”