

Matt. 16:18 The True Church (Taken from J.C. Ryle in *Warning to the Churches*)

This is not the first time I have preached this text. Back in 2008, I preached 5 sermons on vv. 13-20. These were actually the first 5 sermons I ever preached as the pastor at Grace. In preparation I read them, and I really won't say anything new today that was not stated in those sermons. And the same reason I preached this text is the same reason I preach it today. As the Church of Jesus Christ, these truths are foundational for our understanding of the person and work of Jesus. As Kristen and I attended the SBC in Nashville two weeks ago, I read a sermon by J.C. Ryle, entitled "The True Church" in a book called *Warnings to the Churches*, which is where I get my title (Also, I will follow his outline). And as I read the chapter in the context of the SBC, I thought it may be helpful to consider the Church to which we belong as a REMINDER that no matter what is happening in this sinful world, Jesus Christ is building and will finish building his church. And there is no power that can stop this great work. I will highlight 5 truths about the True Church.

1. There is a building. Jesus says, "I will build my church." WHAT is He building? He is building the church. Now, this does not refer to a brick and mortar building like the one in which we meet. It is true that we meet in this building. But, the building is not the church. The people of God are those whom Christ is building. Do you remember I used to often say, "*thank you for bringing the church to the building.*" This is why I don't like to say (as we've often heard), "*This is God's house.*" Though, I think people are less to say that in a YMCA than they would in a traditional "church" building, as if the building itself had some kind of special power. Now, in the day of Solomon, the glory of God descended in the Temple. But today, as we look back on the cross of Christ and his ascension, we know that God poured out his Holy Spirit upon his people and wherever they gather, whether in this mountain or on that mountain, or in that desert, or under that tent, or in the building with a steeple, or in the local YMCA, there we have the church. These are the people.

In this regard, this church is no visible structure. J.C. Ryle says, "*It is no particular visible church on this earth. It is not the Eastern Church or the Western Church. It is not the Church of England or the Church of Scotland, much less is it the Church at Rome.*" Today, this "building" is made up of all true believers in the Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible is clear. They are those who have repented of their sins and have fled to Christ by faith. They are those who have been made "new creatures" (2 Cor. 5:17). They are God's elect (Rom. 8:33; Tit. 1:1). They are all those who have received the grace of God (2 Cor. 6:1). They are those who have been washed in the blood of Christ (Rev. 7:14). They are those who have been clothed in the righteousness of Christ (1 Cor. 1:30). They are those who have been born again and sanctified by the Spirit of Christ (John 3:3; Rom. 8:9). All of these from every nation, tribe, people, and tongue belong to this church.

Externally, the members of this building do not all worship in the same way, nor do they use the same form of government. But, they all worship with one heart, and are led by the SAME Spirit, coming to God through the Lord Jesus Christ. Whether they are Baptist, Presbyterian, Independent, Episcopal, etc., they all serve the interests of this one true church. They are all really and truly holy, they say alleluia, and they can all say A-men. And in this regard, none of these have the right to say, "*I am the true church.*" We have brothers and sisters all over the

world that make up this “building,” which is the true church. And outside this church there can be no salvation.

2. There is a builder. Now, it is true that God is building the church. And, the Holy Spirit is building the church. The Bible is clear. The Father chooses, and the Holy Spirit sanctifies (much more we could say here). However, there is a PECULIAR sense in which Jesus builds. He is the redeemer and the Savior of the church. This is why Jesus declares in our text, **“I will build my church.”** Let’s think for a moment what Jesus does in building the church.

If you are a Christian today, consider the work of Christ in your life. He is the one who has called you (Rom. 1:16). It is Christ who who “quickens” you. John 5:21: **“For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son gives life to whom he will.”** It is Christ who washes away your sins. Rev. 1:5: **“To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood . . .”** He gives you peace. John 14:27: **“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.”** He gives you eternal life. John 10:28: **“I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand.”** He grants you repentance. Acts 5:31: **“God exalted him at his right hand as Leader and Savior, to give repentance to Israel and forgiveness of sins.”** It is Christ that has enabled you to become one of God’s children. John 1:12: **“But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God . . .”** It is Christ who works in you now to give you life, and also to give you eternal life. John 14:19: **“Because I live, you also will live.”** In short, it has “pleased the Father that in Christ should all fullness dwell” (Col. 1:19). He is the HEAD of the church. Christ is the author and finisher of your faith! He shall keep you to the last and present you, faultless, without spot or wrinkle, and give you to the Father. And He does this with great joy. What the sun is to our solar system, Christ is to us. We do not exist without Him. He is the builder of his church. If He does not build, there is no church. Preachers can preach and writers can write, but the Lord Jesus alone can build.

And, He is the most-wise builder. All his work is done at just the right time and in the right way. Each stone is put into the right place. Sometimes he chooses great stones, sometimes he chooses small stones. Sometimes the work goes on fast, sometimes slow. Personally, I am at times impatient. But God’s time is not my time. And Jesus, the great builder makes no mistakes. How many times have you worked on a project only to make a mistake and have to go back and fix it? He knows exactly what He is doing. He sees the end from the beginning. His plan is perfect. Think of the great architects of this world, the great buildings, the great constructions, the Pyramids, the Great Temple of Solomon, the Great Wall of China, the amazing details of Mt. Rushmore upon the mountain; none of these compare to the wisdom of Christ as the builder of his church.

And, consider his great power! He carries on the work in spite of opposition from the world, the flesh, and the devil. Through the storms of life and troubled times, silently, quietly, without noise, without stir, without excitement, the building of the church continues.

Consider also Christ’s great condescension and mercy. He often chooses the most unlikely and roughest stones and fits them into his excellent work. He despises none and rejects none of his

own as he builds them. He delights to show mercy. I feel as though I am the prime example. I often feel as Paul who says, "I am the chief of sinners." Yet, by the grace of God here I am!

Also, the world takes very little notice of the church Christ is building. They do not care about the conversion of souls or broken spirits or penitent hearts. But, the angels in heaven rejoice over ONE sinner that comes to repentance. This is the business of our builder, and it is of utmost importance to Him. For the preserving of his church, the laws of nature have oftentimes been suspended. For the good of the church, all things are ordered and arranged. For the sake of the elect, wars are brought to an end, and peace is given to a nation. Statesmen, rulers, emperors, kings, presidents, heads of governments, all have their schemes and plans and think they are of vast importance. But there is another work going on, one of INFINITE importance; and all these rulers are but axes and saws in the hand of the Lord Jesus in the gathering of living stones into the one true church.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, let us rejoice that the building of the church does not fall on our shoulders, but on the shoulders of the Builder, the Lord Jesus Christ. Let us rejoice that it does not rest upon man. And He will carry on his work until He comes. He will accomplish it.

3. There is a foundation. We read "Upon this rock I will build my church." There are many who believe this "rock" is Peter. But, with great assurance, I disagree. If so, he could have easily said, "*Upon you, I will build my church.*" But, He did not. He says upon this "Rock." Now, I know there is a lot here, and a lot has been written on this topic. And in the context of Matt. 16, Peter had just made the great confession, "**You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.**" Well, in response to this confession, I believe Jesus is referring to Himself. It was the truth concerning Jesus Christ Himself which was the rock. He is the mediator between God and man. He is the Messiah. He is the surety of all God's promises, the real intercessor between God and man. This is the rock, and this the foundation upon which the Church of Christ is built. Let's think about this foundation for a moment.

If you are going to build a skyscraper, how important would the foundation be. How much would it cost? You will pay whatever it takes to secure the building. You would be willing to pay quite a bit I believe. Well, consider the cost at which the church's foundation was laid. In order for the foundation of the church to be sufficient, there was a great price, an infinite price. It's foundation NEEDED that the Son of God should take our nature upon himself; this is the incarnation. And in that nature live, suffer, and die, not for his own sins, but for ours. It needed that in that nature Christ should go to the grave, and the rise again. It needed that in that nature Christ should go up to heaven, to sit at the right hand of God, having obtained eternal redemption for his people. NO OTHER FOUNDATION could have born the weight of such a church of which our text speaks. NO OTHER FOUNDATION could have met the necessities of a world of sinners.

Think of your sins even this week. Sins of thought, sins of the imagination, sins of the heart, sins of the head, sins which all your family has seen, and sins which no man knows, sins against God, and sins against man, sins of omission and commission, sins of all kinds and descriptions - - This mighty rock bears them all. The building will not fall down. Your soul will be kept. You are safe and secure upon such a great foundation! To this one foundation every member of Christ's true

church is joined! In many things believers are not united and are often in disagreement. But, in the matter of the foundation of their soul, ALL of us are of one mind. There is ONE foundation! Today, if you are in Christ, you are built upon this foundation. Here, you find your peace, your hope, your joy; all because of the person and work of Christ as your foundation.

4. There are implied trials. In our text, Jesus mentions the “gates of hell.” I think we are to understand this statement to mean the power of the devil. The history of the Church of Christ has always been one of conflict and war. It has always been assailed by a deadly enemy, Satan, called the prince of this world (Eph. 2:2). He is always stirring up opposition to all the members of the true church. He is ever urging the children of this world to do his will, and to injure and harass the people of God. If he cannot bruise the head, he will bruise the heel (Gen. 3:15). In the Bible examples are abundant. There are always the “Pharaohs, the Herods, the Neros, the Julians, the Diocletians, the bloody Marys.

For the Christian Life is War! Ryle says Life “*has always been a bush burning, but not consumed—a woman fleeing into the wilderness, but not swallowed up. The visible churches have their times of prosperity and seasons of peace, but never has there been a time of peace for the true church. Its conflict is perpetual. Its battle never ends.*” Consider some examples. All the apostles were martyred, except John, who has exiled to an island to die. Think of the Apostle Paul, beaten, stoned to death, shipwrecked, snake bitten, imprisoned, etc. Think of Luther and Calvin and many others, numerous martyrs. Heb. 11:37-38 says, “**They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated—of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.**”

Brothers and sisters, life is war. It is short and full of troubles. Paul describes our experience as a continual wrestling match. And we know this to be true. Home for the Christian lies on the other side of a troubled sea. Many have gone before us. Hell has assailed them, but has not prevailed. As Jesus says, “***If they persecute me, they will persecute you.***” Martin Luther said, “*Cain will go on murdering Abel so long as the Church is on earth.*” In one of my favorite quotes, Ryle says, “*The warfare of the true child of God is as much a mark of grace as the inward peace which he enjoys. No cross, no crown! No conflict, No saving Christianity.*” Our Lord Jesus also says to us: “**Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you**” (Matt. 5:11-12).

5. There is a security. Finally, in this text we see the promise of security. “**The gates of hell shall not prevail against it.**” The Church will be persecuted, but it will prevail. In spite of EVERY assault the church will stand. All other created things will perish and pass away, but not the Church of Christ. “*The hand of outward violence, or the moth of inward decay, prevail over everything else, but not over the ‘temple’ that Christ builds.*” Think of all the empires that have fallen. Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Persia, Rome, Greece—where are they now? As the creation of man’s hands, they have passed away. But, the church of Christ lives on! The most impressive cities are now ruins.

And let me say also that the earliest visible churches have in many cases decayed and perished. Think of the 7 Churches of Revelation. We could also name the church of Alexandria or the one in Constantinople. In many cases they were proud of their bishops, their synods, their ceremonies, their learning and antiquity. What happened to them? They lost their first love, they did not glory in the cross of Christ, they did not hold fast the gospel, they did not give Jesus his rightful office. They are now among the things that have been. Their candlestick has been taken away. However, all this time the true church has lived on. When it has been oppressed in one country, it has fled to another. In this regard Ryle says: *“Fire, sword, prisons, fines, penalties, have never been able to destroy its vitality. Its persecutors have died and gone to their own place, but the Word of God has lived, and grown and multiplied. Weak as this true church may appear to the eye of man, it is an anvil which has broken many a hammer in times past . . . He that lays hands on it, is touching the apple of God’s eye.”*

The promise of our text is true of the church. Christ will never be without a witness in the world. In the worst of times, in the best of times, Christ has a people; He is building his church. Brothers and sisters, we have no idea the places where the church of God is being built. Also, the promise of our text is true of individuals. Christ will hold you fast. Let me ask, “Can you prevent tomorrow’s sun from rising? Can you stop the tide from coming in? Can you hold the planets from moving in their orbits?” Then you cannot stop the salvation of any believer who belongs to the Church of Christ! The Gates of Hell will not prevail!

The true church is Christ’s body; and not one bone in this mystical body will ever be broken. We are the bride of Christ. We are Christ’s flock. We are the wheat of the earth. We will be sifted and tossed here and there, but we will be gathered into one barn. The captain of our salvation loses none of his soldiers. His plans are never defeated. Therefore, DO NOT FEAR. He who began a good work in you will complete it.

We have a building. We have a builder. We have a foundation. There are great trials. But, the church of Christ is secure. We are secure!