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Bread of Life Baptist Church
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Matthew 16:13-20

The Church's Foundation, Expansion, and Authority

I grew up in a Southern Baptist church in the heart of the Bible Belt. It's no surprise, then, that I grew up simply *assuming* that every church has *church membership*. I simply assumed that was a part of doing church. But when I went to college, this assumption of mine was challenged for the first time. I met Christian friends who grew up in churches on the West Coast and then moved to Tennessee for college, just like me; but when they began visiting baptist churches in the area, they were shocked to encounter church membership for the very first time; the churches they had grown up around never practiced such a thing - they had never even heard of church membership!

But this is not simply a West Coast phenomenon; many people and churches have questioned and even rejected church membership over the last several decades. It has become quite the controversial topic. Many people have begun to question, even *reject*, the idea of church membership, claiming that it is not important or necessary. Some people question membership because they simply don't think it is important or has any value; this is especially true for those who have a highly *individualistic* view of the Christian life - they see the Christian faith as a personal, private matter, just between the individual Christian and God; they reason: "Sure, church can be helpful, but is optional; my faith is my business, not the church's." Similarly, many have a *consumeristic* view of church; the church is viewed as a store or business, the churchgoer is seen as a consumer (or shopper), and the point is simply for the individual to have their *preferences* and *felt needs* met; attending church is seen as a business transaction, a service, a product - not a community of believers committing to *be the church* together, as members of the same body.

Other Christians reject church membership because they claim it is *unbiblical*, maybe even harmful. The idea of having *members* distinct from visitors and casual attenders is seen as *exclusive* and *unloving*. The thinking goes like this: "Who are we to tell someone that they can or cannot be a part of our church? Wouldn't that be exclusive and unloving?"

It should go without saying that we, of all people, definitely want to be loving! But we don't follow man's definition of love; we walk in the *love of Jesus*. And so, we have to ask: *Does the Bible really teach us that we should have some form of church membership, or not?*

The answer *must* be an emphatic “yes.” As we read the New Testament, it seems clear that the writers simply *assumed* that there was some way of knowing *who the specific members of a specific local church were*. After all, the New Testament is *filled* with “one another” commands that simply *cannot* be obeyed simply cannot be fulfilled by ourselves, as individual Christians, but require being a part of a Christian community: *the local church*. Or, as another example, there are specific pastors over specific Christians in the Bible; there must be some way of knowing *which people* come underneath the authority and care of *specific pastors*. Clearly, the Bible assumes each local church will be made up of specific members, and such membership would be known to each other and their leaders.

But still we could ask: “Do we really have the authority to declare who gets to belong to our local church as members and who doesn't?” In other words: do we have the biblical authority to have *exclusive church membership*?

Matthew 16:13-20 answers these questions for us. In this passage, we see the very first mention of the *Church*. This is before the Cross; the Church isn't born until after the resurrection, in the book of Acts. Yet Jesus's plan was always to gather a *people* to Himself; he gathers those he saves as His *redeemed community*. And here, in this passage, he proclaims that He will build his *church*, the gathered community of His saved people, *on the foundation belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ*. He declares the foundation of His church, and a promise about how he will build it. But then, he also declares the *authority and responsibility* He gives to His church to *wield the keys of the Kingdom* - to mark out *who belongs to His church*, and who gets to be members of the local church, *based on true faith in the gospel of Christ*.

So let us first look at *the Church's Foundation*.

I. The Church's Foundation: Proclaiming and Believing the Gospel of Christ (vv.13-18)

The passage opens with Jesus asking his disciples a question: “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” Jesus is referring to himself using one of the titles used in the Old Testament to refer to the Messiah, God's promised savior. However, in that day there was a lot of confusion

and disagreement over what to expect about the Messiah. And this is reflected in the disciples' answer: "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." We already saw, in chapter 14, that Herod thought Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead; others thought he was one of the other prophets who had come back, such as Elijah. But then Jesus asks for the Twelve disciples to proclaim *their own views* of who Jesus is: "But who do *you* say that I am?" Simon Peter replies in verse 16, most likely speaking as a representative spokesman for the rest of the disciples (as he often does). He answers: "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God." "*Christ*" is not Jesus's last name, as I'm sure we all know; the word *Christ* is the word for *Messiah*, or *anointed one*. Peter is proclaiming that he believes Jesus is truly the *Messiah*, the Savior and King God promised to send in the scriptures. Indeed, he proclaims Jesus is "the Son of the living God." Whether or not Peter knew the full truth of what he said at that time, we know that this is exactly who Jesus is - *the God-Man*, the eternal Son of God who came to earth, being born as a man, to come and save God's people; he came to deliver us from our sin, guilt, and even death. Jesus came to live a perfect life in our place, die on the cross for our sins, and to be raised from the grave, defeating sin, Satan and death, once and for all, for His people - anyone who believes in Him!

As we'll see next week, the rest of chapter 16 will further flesh out this *gospel*, this "good news," as Jesus's mission. They didn't fully understand it all yet; nevertheless, their confession here, though partial, represents faith in Jesus as God's promised King and Savior, the Messiah and Son of God. And Jesus responds, in v.17, by affirming this declaration as true: "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah!" (that is, son of Jonah, or son of John), "For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." Peter, and the other disciples, did not reach this conclusion because of their earthly wisdom or intelligence; it was revealed by God Himself! And so it is with all of us; we believe in the gospel of Jesus purely by the grace of God, as He reveals Himself to us through His Spirit and Word. As the gospel is proclaimed today, Jesus reveals Himself to us and draws us to Himself in faith, by His grace! But he doesn't save us just to be individual Christians; He brings us together *to be His people*; when Jesus calls us to Himself, He pulls us into the community of *fellow believers - the church*.

We see this in v.18: "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." Peter sounds like the greek word for "rock," and so Jesus uses a *pun*, a play on words, to draw a metaphor: Jesus will *build* His church

on this *rock*, using *this rock as the foundation*. So what is “this rock,” the foundation Jesus builds his Church on? In one sense, it’s Peter; but not in the way that the Roman Church says, claiming that here Jesus is installing him as the first Pope; that is clearly not the case, as the rest of the New Testament plays out. Rather, Peter, and the rest of the disciples, later called the Apostles, are the *foundation* of Christ’s church, specifically because they are witnesses to Jesus’s gospel and proclaim the gospel - just as Peter’s confession makes clear here. For example, Ephesians 2:20 says the church is “built on the foundation of the Apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone.” Jesus is declaring that He will build His church on the foundation of *faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ* - just as Peter’s confession modeled, and just as the Apostles would go on to proclaim as the early church was founded. And so it is today: Jesus builds his church through *the gospel*: as it is proclaimed, and as people truly believe in it, so Jesus *builds His church*.

This is because Jesus’s *church* is made up of *believers* - those who trust in the good news of who Jesus is and what He has done: that He is the God-Man, the promised Savior, King, and Lord, who fulfills GOD’s promises of salvation for all who believe in His life, death, and resurrection as sufficient to take away the guilt and penalty of our sin! When we truly believe this gospel message, we are not only saved, but we *join Jesus’s people, His church*. Jesus’s true church is made up of true believers.

The Bible leaves no room for “lone wolf Christianity.” The moment we become believers we are united to Christ; and Christ’s body is *the church*. This is true of all believers, and so all true believers, throughout time and space, are part of *the one true Church; the one true people of God*. But this also applies to *local churches* - each local church is meant to *physically and visibly represent this reality*, allowing us to live out the Christian life *together* in a real, meaningful way. Therefore, a *prerequisite* for joining the local church - *a non-negotiable requirement for church membership* - is for the individual to actually be a *real Christian*, a true believer in the gospel of Jesus Christ. This belief is called ***regenerate church membership***: this is a foundational Baptist belief, and it comes straight from the Lord’s words in this passage, among other Biblical passages. Church members must, first and foremost, truly be believers. We’re going to look more at how we go about that in point 3; but for now, we just need to note that this *must* be the case because the very foundation and nature of Jesus’s church is built upon the *proclamation and*

belief in the gospel of Jesus Christ. To belong to a church as a member requires belonging, first and foremost, to *Jesus's true church as a believer.*

But Jesus's words in verse 18 also drive another point home that we need to recognize this morning:

II. The Church's Assurance: Jesus Unfailingly Builds His Church Through Gospel Proclamation (vv.18, 20)

Let's look again at what Jesus says in v. 18: "on this rock I will *build my church*, and the *gates of Hell shall not prevail against it.*" Jesus makes very clear that the church is *His*, not ours; and Jesus Christ is the one who *builds* His church. Not only did He lay the foundation, but He is still currently building it, brick by brick, person by person, even now. As we've seen, Jesus is building His church *through the proclamation of the gospel and through the conversion of sinners as they believe in the gospel message.* In other words, Jesus builds it through us sharing, preaching, teaching, and living out the gospel. Now, in verse 20 of this passage, he tells the disciples to not publicly make Jesus's identity as savior known yet, because of the unique time period they were in before the cross; as the next section will show, they did not yet fully understand it themselves, even. However, after Jesus's death and resurrection, he gives His followers a very different charge: in the Great Commission (**Matt. 28: 16-20**), he declares to all Christians, as His disciples and followers, that our *mission* is to "make disciples" of others - through sharing the gospel and teaching "all that Christ commanded." Therefore, Jesus builds his church through us, as we carry out our mission (the Great Commission) through sharing, proclaiming, teaching, and living out faith in the gospel of Christ.

And precisely because the church is *Jesus's church*, not ours, He gives an assuring promise: "the gates of Hell shall not prevail against it." This is obviously a promise meant to assure us; but what exactly are we being assured of? It's possible that "gates of Hell," or "Hades," refers to the powers of Hell and Satan, who blinds and manipulates the unbelieving world and attacks the church as we go out on our gospel mission; *or*, it refers to the realm of death, the consequence of our sins; *or*, quite possibly, it refers to both, capturing the reality that the powers of Hell represent our greatest enemies: *Sin, Satan, and Death itself.* Either way, the language here pictures the *Church* on the offense and the "gates of Hell" on the defense; the idea is that Jesus builds his church *through the Church going forth of gospel mission*, and that this

mission is a direct *attack* on the powers of Hell at work in the sin and unbelief of this world. And Jesus assures us that as we go about on our gospel mission as the church, *we will prevail* against the forces of sin, Satan, and death - because *Jesus* is building the church; it is *His* mission, and He has already won the victory in His death and resurrection! Therefore, as we go forth in our mission to proclaim the gospel, make disciples, and live and grow as the church, we do not need to fear; we will not lose or be overcome, but shall *win* - our gospel mission, as the church, will not be overcome by the Devil or the unbelieving world that seeks to stamp us out; the church will prevail, the gospel will continue to go forth, and the church will be built throughout the world!

So here's the application of this promise for us this morning: Jesus promises to build His church through the *gospel*; through His Word being proclaimed and believed. If we want to join in Christ's work of building His church and carrying out the Great Commission, we must be devotedly committed to *proclaiming, believing, and living out the gospel*. We must be committed to evangelism; to discipleship; to the preaching and teaching of God's Word; we must be committed to being a *gospel-centered and gospel-driven church*. Jesus doesn't promise to build His church through programs, an excellent music ministry, or impressive facilities; He builds His church *through the gospel*. This is why everything we do as a church must be *gospel-centered*. We read, teach, preach, and obey the Bible - and the whole point of the Bible unfolds the gospel of Christ, our need for it, and its implications. We sing the gospel. We pray in light of the gospel. And we obey the gospel in our lives, both as a church, and as individual Christians. We carry out the gospel mission in our lives, our evangelism, and our discipleship. ***Jesus builds His church through the gospel mission of the church.*** And that's a promise. So let us not lose sight of our mission; let us not be distracted. Let us carry out the mission as Jesus accomplishes it through us.

And to do so, we need to know the *responsibility and authority* Jesus has given to us in order to carry out this mission:

III. The Church's Authority: The Local Church has the Responsibility and Authority to Identify True Believers of the True Gospel (v. 19)

The foundation of the church is the *confession of the true gospel of Jesus Christ*. The church is made up of *true believers* who profess faith in the *true gospel*. Jesus builds his church through the mission of the gospel, as those who believe are added to the church. But the question remains: how do we know who can be considered, from our perspective, *true believers*,

confessing the *true gospel*, and part of the *true church* of Christ? To put the question differently: who has the authority to affirm a definition of the gospel as *legitimate* or *illegitimate*? What Jesus tells us here is: *yes*. Jesus gives us, as the local church, a *job*: our job responsibility is to *affirm* the right confession of the *true gospel of Jesus Christ*; this is why, for example, we have statements of faith, outlining what are the boundaries of right and wrong Christian belief, based on what the Bible teaches. But the follow-up question is: do we have the authority to *uphold* and *guard* right beliefs, as a church and among those who join us? Do we, as a church, have the authority to *affirm* or *deny* someone's profession of faith in Christ as either *credible* or *not credible*? The answer is again: *yes*. In verse 19, Jesus is giving us, as the church, the *authority* to carry out the *job responsibility* he has given us.

Jesus says: "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." This verse is dense and highly debated, so let's walk through it slowly. First, Jesus is giving the "keys of the kingdom." The "keys" here are a symbol of *authority* (as they are in other passages, such as Rev. 1:18). Jesus is giving Peter and the apostles the *authority* to do something. And we see it is related to the "kingdom of heaven" and its operation on earth. We have seen Jesus talk about the Kingdom of Heaven all throughout the book of Matthew; he ushers it in through his life, death, and resurrection; all who believe in this gospel *join* the kingdom of heaven, so that all Christians on earth belong to it; and in the end, when we die or when Jesus returns, we will live in the Kingdom of Heaven forever.

What does it mean, then, that Jesus is giving the authority to "*bind and loose*" in the kingdom of heaven? To understand this verse, we have to answer a couple of questions: first, 1. Who has this authority?; secondly, 2. What is being being "bound" and "loosed," people or things?; and third, 3. What exactly does the binding and loosing refer to? The context of this passage already clues us in on the fact that this has to do with Jesus building his church through the gospel, both in rightly *affirming* the true gospel and through people *truly confessing faith* in the gospel of Christ. This authority, then, occurs within the context of the church; it is dealing with identifying true confessions of faith in the true gospel.

We know this is the right way to understand this verse because of Jesus's words in Matthew 18:18, just a couple of chapters later; Jesus uses this same language again: "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.” The context of Matt. 18 deals with the *local church*; there, the *local church* is wielding the authority of the keys of the kingdom; and the *binding and loosing* deals with not things, but *people*. In Matt. 18, the church wields the “keys” through the practice of church discipline, by declaring that the unrepentant individual can no longer be considered part of the church because they can no longer be considered a *true believer*.

In other words, Peter and the Apostles affirmed a right understanding of the gospel for us, primarily in the writings of the New Testament. And on the basis of the Bible’s authority, the local church *affirms* the right understanding of the gospel by *identifying* whether or not someone’s claim to be a believer is *true and credible*. The local church “binds” and “looses” people by declaring whether or not that person can be considered a believer, based upon whether or not their profession of faith in Christ is *true and credible*, in line with the Bible. Now, this doesn’t mean that the church *makes* someone a Christian or not a Christian; rather, the church is simply trying to *identify* who is *already* a citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven.

It’s like this: picture an embassy of the United States in a foreign country. If an American citizen living in that country needs to renew their passport or get a new one, the Embassy has the authority to do that for them, on behalf of America. However, when the embassy does this, they are not *making* someone a citizen; they are simply *affirming* a reality that is already true. Therefore, the citizen has to show *proof* that they are truly American citizens; and then, the embassy has the authority to back up that claim and put their stamp of approval, if you will, on their passport, pronouncing them a legitimate citizen.

And so it is with the church. Each local church is an *embassy* of the Kingdom of Heaven. All of us, as members, must first be *citizens* of the Kingdom by grace through faith in Christ alone. And we are also put to work; we have the responsibility, as the church, to *affirm* the proof that each other member is also a legitimate citizen of the Kingdom of Heaven. When we baptize a new believer, or receive someone into membership from another church, we are, like an embassy, placing our *stamp of approval* upon that person, declaring, “We, as an outpost of the Kingdom of God, believe that this person is truly a Christian; we are affirming their profession of faith in the gospel; we affirm that the gospel they confess is the true gospel of CHrist; and we back up their claim to be citizens because we see *proof* of their faith in their lives.” We don’t *make* them Christians; we simply affirm that we believe they can be considered true Christians.

This is exactly what we do everytime we declare someone a *church member*. And this is why church membership is so important. Church membership is not supposed to be just a name on a roll; it's supposed to be *meaningful*. It's our stamp of approval on someone, saying that we, as a church, declare that they can be considered a Christian. If we can't say that about someone in good conscience, based on the authority of the Bible, then *we shouldn't let them be a member of our church*. That wouldn't be loving to them, but would only give a *false assurance*, making them numb to the gospel they so desperately need to repent and believe in; it wouldn't be good for the church; and it would be *disobedience and dishonoring* to Christ. This is why we have a membership process, in which we make sure someone is giving a *credible profession of faith* in Christ before they join. This is why we vote, because *we as the church* are declaring our affirmation of their profession of faith. We must take this responsibility *very seriously*. And this doesn't just mean when we bring someone *into* our church; as we'll see later in Matthew 18, this must be an *ongoing reality*. Just because we were able to back up someone's claim to be a believer in the past, when they joined, doesn't always mean we can do the same today; for example, if they're no longer repenting from sin, if they have walked away from the faith - or if they are no longer attending our church and we haven't seen them in months or even years, then we have no way of *legitimately affirming* their faith; and therefore, they really shouldn't be members of our church. Again, this isn't snobbery - it's an *act of love*. We love each other by making sure that the *faith* we confess is in the *right gospel*; and that it is backed up by *proof* of repentant faith in our lives. We want nothing more than to encourage one another to repent and believe, to rest in the assurance of salvation in Christ! That's what membership is supposed to mean! But it can only serve that purpose if membership *actually means something*.

Therefore, let us, as a church, take up the mission and responsibility Christ has given us. Let us boldly proclaim the gospel; let us *confess and live out faith in Christ!* Let us take this mission seriously in our evangelism, discipleship, and membership process.

But this also has application for each individual: each of us need the security of belonging to a local church, that backs up our profession of faith. We need to belong to a gospel-centered church, both for our own good, and for the good of others, as we link arms together in the gospel mission.

But most importantly, each of us must, first and foremost, *belong to the Kingdom of Heaven*. And that doesn't happen just because you're a member of a church; its not based on any

good works you have or haven't done; it's based only on trusting in Jesus Christ alone for your salvation. If you have any questions about this - about how to be saved, about baptism, or church membership, I would love to speak with you. You can come now and wait on the front row, or you can find me after the service. Let us pray.