Jesus, Builder of the Church (New Testament Figures)

The Twelve, the gates of Hades, and why red-letter Christianity falls short

SPEAKER	Matt Ryniker
DATE	Sunday, July 31, 2022
PASSAGES	Matthew 16:13-20; Mark 4:33-34; Luke 6:12-16; Matthew 10:1-10; 1 John 1:1-3; Acts 1:21-22; Acts 4:13; Ephesians 5:28-29; Colossians 2:18-19; Ephesians 2:20
MESSAGE	Begins at 1:10:26 in the service

THE BIG IDEA

Jesus knows what he is doing with his church. He spoke to crowds in parables but explained everything privately to twelve men he chose after a night of prayer, so that an authoritative witness to who he is would go out to every generation. That is why following the real Jesus means receiving the apostles' witness rather than building our own Jesus from the red letters – and why we can pray about the church's troubles knowing that the builder is him.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- "Red-letter Christianity" sounds spiritual but does not hold together. Which Gospel did Jesus write? Everything we know of him comes through the apostles.
- Left with only parables and sayings, it is easy to fill the gaps like frog DNA in *Jurassic Park* – hippie Jesus, founding-father Jesus, revolutionary Jesus.
- Christ nourishes and cherishes his church; his plan for building it is loving and thoughtful, not haphazard.
- Choosing twelve and teaching them privately was not to hide the truth but to protect and promote it, so that no one could claim a private revelation of their own.

- "I will build my church." However you read "this rock," the main point is that Jesus is the builder and it is his.
- At Caesarea Philippi, a pagan centre beside a supposed gate to the underworld, Jesus is on the offensive: the gates of Hades will not withstand his church.
- So pray, "Jesus, what are you going to do about that?" – and repent of following a Jesus of our own imagining.

▶ 1:10:26

The congregation had just heard from Allison and Michael Sherwin, ten years in Cape Town with All Nations making disciples and training leaders – including a Malawian named Shadrach who has trained twenty-two local leaders – and Geno had opened the service with Isaiah's "I will not forget you; behold, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands" (Isaiah 49:13–16). Matt had the room greet one another, "like passing the peace," and then put up a cartoon.

"Which Gospel did Jesus write?"

▶ 1:13:45

Phillip Latham drew it from Matt's sketches. Jesus speaks in parables, and the crowd responds with everything from a grimace to a smile. In private, he explains everything to the disciples. The apostles publish all that Christ gave them by the Spirit – and a man in the corner says, "That's not what Jesus taught you in private." His friend asks, "What exactly are you basing that claim on?" "Just… you know." "You're like, I was expecting it to be more ha-ha funny. It's more, actually, Matt's-making-a-point funny."

▶ 1:14:56

The point is "red-letter Christianity": "I'm just a Jesus person – what's with Peter or Paul?" It sounds spiritual; Paul mocks it in Corinth, where some boasted, "I follow Christ" (1 Corinthians 1:12). Logically: which Gospel did Jesus write? The so-called real Jesus already comes to us through the apostles. And because Jesus taught in parables on purpose, if you keep only the parables and sayings it is easy to choose your own Jesus and fill the gaps, like the frog DNA in *Jurassic Park*: soft hippie Jesus, "founding father bro America Jesus," revolutionary anti-religion Jesus. "But the problem with that is, the Jesus entrusted his private teachings, and himself, to the apostles."

A builder who loves his church

▶ 1:16:52

> "In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church."
>
> EPHESIANS 5:28–29 ↗

Not a wedding sermon, Matt assured, but look at the two verbs: Christ nourishes and cherishes the church. So when Jesus has a plan for building his body, "not only is it not stupid, but it's thoughtful… he knows what he's doing, and he's motivated by love."

Twelve, chosen on purpose

▶ 1:18:05

> "In these days he went out to the mountain to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when day came, he called his disciples and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles."
>
> LUKE 6:12–16 ↗

▶ 1:19:13

Picture concentric circles: the public he impressed, the devoted followers, friends who spent much time with him, and at the centre the Twelve, chosen after a whole night of prayer to be with him constantly. Why the distinction? Partly to stop "yahoos from any old town coming out of the woodwork" claiming Jesus told them something special. Everyone knew there were twelve men always with him.

▶ 1:20:17

Speaking plainly only to them might sound like hiding the truth, "but really it's to promote and protect the truth, because there is now a low-tech way of making an authoritative version of what Jesus said and thought." Jesus created a leadership structure in his church that preserved and spread who he is – because he wanted everyone to know him, and it mattered to him what was said about him. He even trained them to do what he did: authority over unclean spirits and every disease, and the charge, "Proclaim as you go, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.' Heal the sick, raise the dead… You

received without paying; give without pay" (Matthew 10:1–10). A growing body of believers, an authoritative witness at the centre, and Jesus at the very centre of that. "What would you call that? He's building a church."

"On this rock"

▶ 1:22:41

> "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.'"
>
> MATTHEW 16:13–20 ↗

▶ 1:23:59

The charge to tell no one is a matter of timing: Jesus would lay down his life at the right moment, and his inner circle needed to know who he was so it could be enshrined with his authority. Then Matt walked through how people read "this rock," while warning that it is largely beside the main point. The classic Roman Catholic reading: Peter is singled out with the keys, the first pope, his role passing on to Linus, Clement and the rest. The classic Protestant reading: Jesus is the rock, the chief cornerstone, as the New Testament says repeatedly; and binding and loosing is given to all the disciples elsewhere.

▶ 1:25:50

("You're like, man, it got real boring all of a sudden. Don't worry, this will end real soon.") Greek scholars note the words differ: *petros*, a stone you can pick up and throw, and *petra*, a rock you can climb. If Jesus meant "on you," there was an easy word for that. Peter himself calls believers living stones (1 Peter 2:5), and Paul says we are "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone" (Ephesians 2:20). The Shepherd of Hermas, Origen and Augustine read it along similar lines; the idea that Peter is the *petra* came around the year 400.

The gates of Hades, on Hades' doorstep

▶ 1:28:36

Matt's favourite reading starts with the setting. Caesarea Philippi sits at the base of Mount Hermon, the biggest mountain in Israel. In the book of Enoch, popular in the New Testament era, Hermon is where rebellious angels conspired against God; in Judges it is called Baal-hermon (Judges 3:3). Eusebius said

the nations still revered it as a sanctuary, and an archaeologist has surveyed more than twenty temples there.

▶ 1:30:31

Caesarea Philippi itself was a pagan supercentre, with temples to the emperor, who might be called "son of god" – and Peter confesses the Son of the *living* God. There was a grotto to Pan with a spring pouring out, considered a gate to the underworld. So, walking through that place, Jesus says: on this *petra* – perhaps the very rock around them – "I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."

▶ 1:32:56

Note two things. Hades is the realm of the dead, not quite the same as hell. And gates are defensive; a gate is not a siege ramp or a chariot, and the Greek has no word for "against" suggesting a counter-attack. People often picture the church hiding under a school desk in a nuclear drill, barely hanging on. "This is kind of the exact opposite of that." Jesus walks to Hades' own house and says he will build his church there, plunder it and declare his lordship, and it will not be able to stand what he is doing.

Back to the point: he is the builder

▶ 1:34:05

However you read the rock, the main point is obvious: "I will build my church." And he builds it in a way that makes sense. "With many such parables he spoke the word to them, as they were able to hear it… but privately to his own disciples he explained everything" (Mark 4:33–34). So after he rose and ascended, anyone wanting to know the real Jesus had somewhere to go – "and it's called the church that Jesus built" – with a defence against "cousin Cletus" claiming Jesus came to his town and said he was special.

▶ 1:35:50

The defining feature of the apostles was not intellect, strategy, wealth or connections. The council saw that Peter and John were "uneducated, common men… And they recognized that they had been with Jesus" (Acts 4:13).

▶ 1:36:16

> "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life… that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ."
>
> 1 JOHN 1:1–3 ↗

▶ 1:37:21

To have fellowship with the Son, you participate in what they tell you. "This isn't a build-it-yourself DIY connection to Jesus." That is why, replacing Judas, it had to be one who had been with them "beginning from the baptism of John until the day when he was taken up" (Acts 1:21–22). "There's only one Jesus… A Jesus of our own imagining has no saving power. There's no forgiveness in the Jesus that we create."

▶ 1:38:30

Is confusion a real threat? Paul warns against one who goes "on in detail about visions, puffed up without reason… and not holding fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, nourished and knit together… grows with a growth that is from God" (Colossians 2:18–19). Picture Mr Spectacular Visions: Jesus came to me in my sleep with something new – "there's a small paywall, but behind that I'll tell you everything. You need Jesus 2.0." The antidote is that there was a real Jesus with a real inner circle on purpose, who knew him not because they were insightful but because he revealed himself to them.

Two takeaways

▶ 1:40:29

The theme is Jesus, builder of the church: he does the building, and he calls it *my* church. First, an attitude change. When the news, the statistics, or a forwarded email saying "act now, America is going down the tubes" drives you to "Oh man, what are we going to do about that?", try a small change: "Jesus, I'll do what you ask – but what are *you* going to do about that?"

▶ 1:41:45

> *"There is a builder of the church, and there's a person to whom the church belongs, and that role is already filled. Jesus, what are you going to do about that? I'll do what you ask. Send me, Lord. But what are you going to do? These are your enemies."*

▶ 1:42:28

Jesus was not afraid standing before a temple to a man called son of god, at a place called the gates of Hades. Second: if you want to follow the real Jesus, not an imaginary one who did not really die for you, and avoid the confusion of puffed-up visionaries, repent of being red-letter-only Christians – "a wayward and degenerate trend within the body that doesn't make sense."

▶ 1:43:35

"Which Gospel did Jesus write? Jesus did it all on purpose. He's the mastermind." If we want to follow him and be loyal to him, we do it his way, receiving the apostolic witness to who he is, what he did and what it meant, "because all of that is a gift to us from him." Matt prayed that we would know who God is and what he is like, and focus on him for real.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

SCRIPTURE IN THIS MESSAGE

- Isaiah 49:13–16
- 1 Corinthians 1:12
- Ephesians 5:28–29
- Luke 6:12–16
- Matthew 10:1–10
- Matthew 16:13–20
- 1 Peter 2:5
- Ephesians 2:20
- Judges 3:3
- Mark 4:33–34
- Acts 4:13
- 1 John 1:1–3
- Acts 1:21–22
- Colossians 2:18–19

FOR YOUR HOPE GROUP

1. What makes “red-letter Christianity” attractive, and what does Matt’s question “Which Gospel did Jesus write?” expose about it?
2. Which “filled-in” Jesus – hippie, patriotic, revolutionary, or another – are you most tempted to build, and why?
3. Why might Jesus have explained everything privately to the Twelve? How does that protect the truth rather than hide it?
4. How does Matt’s reading of Caesarea Philippi – Jesus on the offensive at the gates of Hades – change the way you picture the church?
5. Which worry about the church or the world could you bring to Jesus this week, asking what he is going to do about it rather than what we are?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Matt Ryniker is Hope Chapel’s senior pastor — his own description of the job — and reports to the church’s governing board, who he cheerfully calls his boss. He and his wife Mandy have been held up from Hope’s own pulpit as an example to the congregation. He spent a stretch of his working life as a public school teacher, and he still teaches the parent dedication classes where families commit to raising their children to follow Jesus — a theme that runs straight into this message.

Watch the full message:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MvQIKyOMikw&t=4226s

These notes summarise a message preached at Hope Chapel in Austin, Texas. They are a reader's aid, not a transcript — scripture references link to the full passage so you can read it in context.