

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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Who/What is the Basis for a New Testament Church?

When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets. He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. (Matthew 16:13–19, KJV 1900)

Jesus always asked the right questions to stimulate right thinking and deeper consideration of the issues He raised. In our study passage, He used questions to advance our understanding, both of Him and of His church.

Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? Jesus wasn't concerned with popular opinion. He certainly didn't use popular opinion to shape the characteristics of His church. He seems to use this question to initiate a deepening conviction in the disciples. They need to come to full terms with the fact that popular opinion of their Lord is quite different from their understanding of Him. Popular opinion is typically superficial and often speculative. Jesus will lead the disciples from this rather shallow opinion of Him into the humanly incomprehensible truth of His true Person. Before they can anchor their minds firmly in this truth, they must understand just how divergent popular opinion of Him was from their knowledge. The foundational principle that explains this difference will take us to the source of their knowledge of Jesus, a stark contrast to the source of popular opinion. Popular opinion versus a revelation from God; two sources of information could not be more different.

Jesus starts the probe of the disciples' thinking with a question. "*Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?*" The answers the disciples gave all referred to honorable men. But the answers fall distinctly short of the right answer. However powerful or mysterious Jesus may have appeared to the people, the idea that He in some way was an honorable man from the past, come back from the dead failed to touch the truth of His Incarnate¹ character. First century Jews left an open seat at the table when they celebrated Passover. They believed that, when Messiah was ready to come, Elijah would come back and appear to them as

Messiah's herald. They based their belief on a false understanding of Malachi 4:5-6. Malachi's prophecy pointed to an Elijah-like man who would appear before Messiah; he did not teach that Elijah would personally return. Unless we read the gospels carefully, we might become confused regarding the Elijah-John link. Was John that Elijah-like man, or was he not? Though John didn't confess that he was Elijah, Jesus said he was, so Jesus' answer should settle the question for us. The Jewish belief that Elijah would return was therefore based on a false interpretation of the Malachi passage.

No idea that makes Jesus an honorable man from the past, returned to life, however honorable those men who lived and left their godly impressions on the people, was the correct answer to Jesus' question. Simply stated, the reality of who Jesus was/is could not be determined by probing popular opinion regarding Him.

But whom say ye that I am? As Jesus turns the disciples away from popular opinion to their own personal convictions, He nudges them to far deeper and more intimate reflections. He also requires them to base their answer on their personal knowledge of Him, not on remote rumors about Him. How could the disciples answer this question? Given all the things they'd witnessed in Him, even at this stage, what could they possibly say that would explain all the things He had done in their presence? Peter gave the only sensible answer, the correct answer, "*Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.*" "Christ" refers to the Old Testament prophecies of the coming Messiah. First century Jews may not have always associated Messiah with God Incarnate, the "Son of the living God." They certainly struggled with the many Old Testament prophecies that depicted Messiah at one time as a victorious and glorious figure, and at other times as a suffering and dying figure. Some Jewish commentators decided that one man could not possibly fulfill both sets of prophecies, so they decided that two Messiahs would come, one for

¹ Incarnate means in flesh. Theologians use the term to refer to God taking on human flesh in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ. The same truth appears in the word "Immanuel," God with us.

each of the two prophetic images, the victor and the sufferer. Peter's confession steps beyond the common beliefs of the day and beyond the difficulties of historical expectations, or two Messiahs.

Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. Peter was a common, hardworking commercial fisherman, not a scholar. How could he know things that the leading scholars of his day could not grasp? To borrow the grievous, worn out attitude of our day, what seminary did he graduate from to have such insight?²

When we ask the question regarding Peter's knowledge, how he knew this truth, we are getting to the heart of Jesus' lesson regarding His church. Flesh and blood, including Peter's own flesh and blood, could not grasp the truth that Peter stated.

And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone. (Ephesians 2:20, KJV 1900)

Wherefore also it is contained in the scripture, Behold, I lay in Sion a chief corner stone, elect, precious: and he that believeth on him shall not be confounded. (1 Peter 2:6, KJV 1900)

The second verse above, from Peter's inspired writings forever rejects the idea that Peter considered himself the first pope or the foundation of the church. If that were the case, Peter would be the most surprised of all people to know it.

Both verses deal with the knowledge—perhaps better to describe it as the faith—foundation for a New Testament church. Jesus is the "...chief corner stone," the key Rock in the whole structure of the "Building" of the New Testament church. Since what that church believes and preaches is so integral to her existence, Paul includes the apostles and prophets as part of the building, but not as part of the corner stone. They are part of the building that the corner stone holds together, giving purpose and strength to the whole.

² A couple years ago, Sandra and I attended the graduation ceremony for Master's Seminary (John MacArthur's post-graduate school) to see our grandson receive his Master's Degree. When MacArthur ended the ceremony with prayer, he went into significant details, telling God how the eighty-five or so graduates that evening were so far superior in their qualifications and knowledge to the twelve men that Jesus called. The arrogance of such a claim was almost more than I could bear. Those men spent three and a half years with Jesus, but MacArthur claims that his seminary does a superior job to Jesus. Such is the inexcusable arrogance of religious snobbery in our day. Do these men really think that their seminarians are more effective teachers than Jesus? Thank you; I'll take a nanosecond with Jesus over every degree such a school has to offer.

Peter's point fills out even more details to the same truth that Paul teaches. God the Father chose Jesus to be the chief corner stone. To that role, He is chosen, "elect," and precious. There is no other to match Him. He is beloved of the Father above all others. He should be just as precious to us as He is to the Father.

The active foundational role of the Lord Jesus Christ in a New Testament church appears clearly in both verses. ...*he that believeth on him shall not be confounded.* The word translated "confounded" in this sentence indicates shame, humiliation, or disgrace. If Jesus failed in His divine assignment, any belief in Him would bring the believer to such a disappointing end. However, if He fully succeeded, our belief in Him shall never produce such a sad outcome. Take the time to read First Corinthians 15 and notice how Paul reasons similarly regarding Jesus' literal, bodily resurrection. If we believe that Jesus arose, but He in fact did not rise from the dead, we would be reduced to shameful humiliation for our false belief.

Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. Peter didn't gain this knowledge from an arrogant seminarian. The Father revealed it to him. ...*upon this rock I will build my church.* In this point, Peter is not the exception, the only person to receive such revelation. He is the rule, the example for all others who would subsequently come to the same belief regarding Jesus.

We sometimes drift into thinking of "Revelation" as a mystical divine appearance, something of a modern Mount of Transfiguration kind of event. However, revelation in Scripture often refers to the Lord's empowering of the gospel so that hearers understand things that they would never have otherwise considered.

How that by revelation he made known unto me the mystery; (as I wrote afore in few words, Whereby, when ye read, ye may understand my knowledge in the mystery of Christ) Which in other ages was not made known unto the sons of men, as it is now revealed unto his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit. (Ephesians 3:3-5, KJV 1900)

However the Lord revealed this truth to Paul, we gain access to that revelation by reading what Paul wrote. God does not need another Mount of Transfiguration to reveal His truth, especially His truth regarding the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, to His people. Our gaining that knowledge occurs as we read and study Scripture and as we hear the gospel. And it is that knowledge or revelation that Jesus uses to build His church. Thus any organization that builds its structure on anything other than the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the revelation of

that truth in the gospel, fails Jesus' test for one of His churches.

How then do we measure our validity as being included—or not included—in the number of people whom He identifies as His church? The primary test must stand precisely where Jesus described His church in our study passage. If we are His “Church,” we stand on His revelation of His Person and work. Failure to stand on that solid foundation leaves us in the questionable position of preaching another Jesus and another gospel. (Galatians 1:6-10) Even though Paul had preached the right gospel and the one and only true Jesus to the Galatians, they chose to ignore his preaching and believe the false gospel that legalistic Judaizers taught them. They were children of God. They at one time, although perhaps briefly, knew the truth. But they fell away from that truth and lost the unique blessing of being numbered as part of His church, built on the single, ageless, and undecaying foundation of the Lord Jesus Christ and His truth, revealed in Scripture. We have no knowledge as to whether the Galatian churches repented and returned or not. We do have Paul's letter to them as a divine warning to us to avoid a similar departure from the Lord Jesus Christ and His revealed truth. Shall we heed the warning or choose to ignore it? Do we seek to be counted by the Lord Himself as being one of His beloved churches, or are we content to sit under our own private vine and fig tree; do what is right in our own eyes? (Judges 21:25) The Lord does not coerce people into His churches. He reveals His truth and convicts and encourages them to join with other believers of similar conviction. The promise of such blessings does not belong to an elite group, but to “...all the seed....” (Romans 4:16) We join Abraham in a godly faith-walk that leads us to join him and enjoy God's rich blessings, or we do what is right in our own eyes and live in the barren desert of our own making. Where shall we stand, you and I?

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Worship service each Sunday 10:30 A. M.
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