

**Matthew 16:13-20** <sup>13</sup> When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" <sup>14</sup> They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." <sup>15</sup> "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" <sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." <sup>17</sup> Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. <sup>18</sup> And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. <sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." <sup>20</sup> Then he warned his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

### “I Will Build My Church”

There is nothing in life that does not involve faith. When we get out of bed we have to have faith that the floor is there. In the world of Quantum physics where all things are possible it is only highly probable that the floor would still be the floor at that moment. The floor could become paper. The probability of that happening is low, but it is still possible. We may call coming to church an act of faith in God, but even when non-believers enter this church they must have faith that the steeple won't collapse upon them. We must have faith in reality. All relationships involve faith. Children must have faith that their parents will be good parents and provide for them and teach them about life. Marriage is as much as if not more so an act of faith than it is of love. Friendship is based in two people having faith in one another. In fact, human community cannot thrive unless we have faith in one another. So, there truly is no part of our lives that does not involve faith, a relationship of trust. This is the way we are.

Yet, When we talk about faith we remove it from our everyday life and relationships and limit it to the context of religious faith where it is misunderstood. There are those for whom faith in God is nothing more than believing certain precepts or ideas about God. In that case faith is nothing more than rationalism where my ability to think it establishes something as true. If I can conceive that there is a God then there must be a God. A theologian named Anselm back in the Middle Ages came up with a number of rational proofs for the existence of God. He's known for saying, "God is that which none greater than can be conceived." This was his way of saying the existence God is a greater conception than me simply having an idea of God. Therefore, God exists. This rational view of God leads to what you call a God of the Gaps in which the existence of God is the only way to explain the unexplainable.

This leads us to another way of talking about religious faith that moves us away from faith being the belief of ideas about God. If God exists then we must be able to experience God in one way or another because we can't know anything unless we can experience it, unless it is observable and measurable. So, if we cannot readily experience God then we cannot have any sure way of saying God exists and we certainly cannot make propositions about something that we can not point to and say "have a look for yourself." This experiential way of talking about religious faith gives way to Agnosticism and Atheism. On the

other hand there are those who say, I believe in God because I have had experiences of God or encountered God in some way. Problems arise here because, simply put, not everybody who believes in God has had their hearts strangely warmed as John Wesley the founder of Methodism said. Moreover, once you start talking religious experience with people of other religions you start to see some similarities that leaves one asking what is a true experience of God.

I said in a sermon several weeks ago something to the effect that a true experience of God the Holy Spirit will always point a person to Jesus Christ. A true encounter of the one true God will always direct a person to Jesus Christ so that me, myself, and I and you, yourself, and you have to personally wrestle with the core question of faith, which is Jesus' question to his disciples, “Who do you say I am?” A lot of people get pointed or drawn to Jesus by an experience of God but let the ball drop by only listening to who the people out there say Jesus is. If you go to Chapters or Indigo or the Oprah Winfrey website you will find a lot of people saying who they *think* Jesus is and almost all of them say, “Really good spiritual person and teacher, but only one of many.” They do not give a confession of faith in Jesus and that's because they haven't taken the time to go past their culture-driven ideas about God to truly wrestle with who he is.

Faith is a relationship of trust in and fidelity to another person. Within trusting relationships revelation happens. If I trust you I will reveal things to you about who I am that I wouldn't tell just anybody. If I can't trust you, then you will only get from me what you need to know. Jesus Christ, indeed God, cannot be known through rationalizing God's existence and believing things about God. God can be encountered if he so chooses to reveal himself to a person by an encounter with the Holy Spirit. But, an experience does not impart the kind of knowing that comes from taking the time to get to know another person. God can only be known by his own self revelation and Jesus Christ is that revelation. So, the question becomes how do I come to know Jesus?

Peter's confession of faith that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the Living God came after he and the others spent day after day after day with him for just over two years. They had seen him do things only God can do like forgive sins and heal diseases and cast out demons. They saw him calm storms. Peter himself had walked on water at Jesus' command. Together they had listened to him teach what it really says in the Bible. Together they had wrestled with their short comings and inability to understand. They had heard the Father himself say, “this is my Beloved Son with whom I am well pleased. Listen to him.” They certainly did not have to understand everything about Jesus, but one thing they could say based on what they'd heard God say and the things Jesus himself was doing – Jesus is the Son of the Living God through whom God is establishing his kingdom and beginning to set the world to right. Without a doubt they knew this and so it was in this Jesus that they were placing their faith.

This confession of faith is the rock upon which Jesus Christ himself is building his Church. Now, by saying that I do not mean that a person must make a rational decision to believe this about Jesus so that they can go to Heaven when they die. Getting people to make a decision to believe that Jesus is their personal saviour and calling that saving faith has been the hallmark of Christian

evangelism for nearly the last 500 years. But, it boils down to simply being the church trying to build itself by getting people to rationalize faith in Jesus and it usually stands in the way of Jesus himself building his church. Jesus says “upon this rock I will build *my* church. Therefore, we must look with an eye of suspicion at any sort of program that says your church will grow if you do this. Another way churches try to build themselves is by fostering and focusing upon certain feelings to create particular experiences.

The confession of faith that Peter made and which we make that Jesus is the Son of the living God through whom God is putting the world to right is not a matter of simply making a rational decision based on certain facts presented to you nor is it the result of feeling feelings and having experiences. Rather, it comes about through participation in a community of disciples who gather around the Scriptures and let themselves be transformed by this new form of community and the truth of the Scriptures. The problem with forms of Christianity that what us to believe certain things about Jesus so that we can go to Heaven when we die or to have certain feelings with respect to Jesus so that I know I’m going to Heaven when I die is that they are escapist and prevent us from seeing that Jesus is building his kingdom in our very midst right before our very eyes and the proper expression of our faith is following him now and getting involved in his mission of bringing in the kingdom so that the world gets a foretaste of what it will be like when he brings it in its fullest, when all are raised from the dead, Heaven and Earth are united, Hell and its minions are destroyed, and the creation is full of the knowing of God just as the waters cover the sea.

Jesus and his kingdom can be known. We get to know him and his mission by involvement in the church that he is building. The mystery of faith is that when Jesus’ followers covenant together to be accountable to Scripture sooner or later we begin to hear him speak to us each and us as a community through those Scriptures. These words that were written long ago about things that happened long ago, well, they begin to address us specifically and deeply personally. We get this sense of, “God, I know this is me your speaking to through these Scriptures, through this preacher, through this hymn, through this silence, and I have no choice but to trust and obey because my life must go a different direction now because now I know that in, through, and as Jesus you are bringing in your reign and putting things to right. I know this is what is and I will follow.” That is the rock of faith upon which Jesus builds his church and the gates of Hell cannot prevail. Amen.