

Romans 12:1-8 The Church's Life
Matthew 16:13-20
August 23, 2026

We have spoken about a series of turning point events in the career of Jesus as presented in the gospels. Among other occasions, these include the Feeding of the Multitude, Jesus Walking on the Water, the Confession of Peter, and later the Transfiguration.

Each gospel account has common features, as well as distinctive. They tell the same story, with differences. It is ours today to consider the account of Peter's Confession as it is told in the Gospel of Matthew, whose version is distinct from the other three because it includes a different dialogue with Peter, in the immediate aftermath of the confession, catching the readers attention with these words:

"Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you in human ways, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build *my church*, and the gates of hell will not overcome it."

And then Jesus went on to say, "I will give to you the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven; whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." After that, Jesus warned them not to tell anybody.

In an ongoing debate between the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant, Orthodox and Evangelical churches, just about all the others, this text by some is interpreted as an affirmation of the supremacy of the Catholic Church over the others.

Protestants, of course, have developed ways of responding to this claim; arguing that this text offers no special place to Catholicism, but refers to Peter's faith and applies to the whole church in all its forms. I mention it only because it has been the temptation among all the Christian confessions to consider themselves to be *the authentic version of the faith*.

There is, of course, no special place given to a Protestant or any other kind of Christian church, not even the Baptists. The best model given to us from the Bible is that of the body. We are all a part of one body, with many parts. It gives us a chance to talk about the church's life.

At any rate, whatever Jesus meant by, "keys to the kingdom," it wasn't control of the Roman Empire or any other kingdom, that he was thinking about. If that were the case, it would be no good to Peter now. It was about the Kingdom of Heaven the Jesus spoke. Jesus believed that the world's historical life had a secondary importance, not a *lack* of importance, just not primary.

We come from eternity, and to eternity we shall return. The world of history, of human beings, has its

importance because God has made it and has given it time and place.

The bigger clue to the meaning of this text, given that in the other three gospels Peter's response does not lead to a discussion of his nickname or of the keys to the kingdom, is that Jesus had asked the question eventually asked of all of us, "who do you say that I am?" And the answer of Peter is, "you are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God."

In this answer lies the significance of Peter. I am not sure Peter understood any of this until later, actually I am pretty sure he did not, probably not until he had seen Jesus die a crucifixion and raised a resurrection, victorious over death.

If I may say, we have a new objection to the life of the church in our time, some who have come to be called, the "nones," meaning, no religious affiliation. They claim to be spiritual but not religious. They say they don't like organized religion. I do not relate well to them.

Unlike these who have let it be known that they have not found church to be a meaningful part of life, I have had a contrary experience. I kind of like organized religion, even with all of its obvious problems and drawbacks. I find that it has been helpful.

I recognize its shortcomings and the many things for which it deserves criticism. Simply by existing in the

world and being a part of its life, the church has been compromised and threatened, it has been involved in a variety of forms of evil, in unspeakable horrors even, and some have questioned whether the good outweighs the bad.

Nonetheless, I see also its positive contributions. Its community and friendships, the buildings and the colleges and the publishing companies and the books and the mission societies, and the music, its art and architecture, all of it.

Its intellectual life keeps me busy enough; it keeps the bible in print and all the commentaries and interpretational aides; its message to the world of the Forgiveness of Sin and mercy as part of the fabric of Creation; it proclaims the Resurrection and the life of the world to come; the love of neighbor as the highest rule.

It has given us the language of our faith, and many of its spiritual but not religious devotees use that language and describe their convictions on its terms, unwittingly participating in its organized life in spite of their misgivings.

I wonder if it is possible for human beings to take in the life of the Church in its true nature and fullness without its organizational side, which feeds and nourishes and offers healing and hope, *and* withstands the assault of the world with its inhumanity and failures, yet the misgivings remain.

In one of the most compelling sermons I have ever read, Frederick Buechner considers them, and some of his thoughts are worth reading here. After considering the Church's mission as given to the disciples in Matthew's gospel when they were called, "heal the sick, raise the dead, cast out demons, cleanse lepers," he writes,

"The church buildings and budgets came later. The forms of church government, the priests and pastors, Baptists and Protestants, the Sunday services with everybody in their best clothes, the Sunday Schools and choirs all came later. So did the Bible study groups and the rummage sales. So did the preachers, the ones on TV who make you sick to your stomach with their phoniness and vulgarity, and the ones closer to home who so often, when I listen to them, seem to claim a faith that rarely seems to have much to do with their own real day-to-day lives in this world or with mine, or the ones also through whose words every once in a while the Word itself touches your heart. They all came later.

Maybe the best thing that could happen to the church would be for some great tidal wave of history to wash all that away — the church buildings tumbling, the church money all lost, the church bulletins blowing through the air like dead leaves, the differences between preachers and congregations all lost too. *Then all we would have left would be each other and Christ, which was all there was in the first place.*"

And that is the point. Jesus tells Peter that his nickname, which means Rock, of course, is a metaphor of the foundation that assures us that of all the forces which threaten church, neither the human profanities nor the demonic forces, will prevail.

He does not say it was Peter or anything connected to him. He does not say it was his faith, or our faith or anyone else's. He associates it with the confession Peter made, which speaks the same truth, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

In other words, it is Jesus, always reminding us that the foundation of human life is in the life of God, which has been revealed to us in Christ, as a proclamation of Love, Redemption, Reconciliation, and Resurrection.

A Time of Memorial for David Spear

We have recently lost a dear friend and brother, Dave Spear. In the absence of a more formal memorial service, we take this moment to remember the contribution his presence made these last few years, and to mark his passing. The obituary is available online, I just want to highlight the particulars for us.

Dave, entered the presence of his Lord on July 17, 2026, at the age of 67. He began attending First Baptist when we came back from the Covid break.

David shared 45 years of marriage with his Patricia. Together they raised their children, Nathaniel, Matthew and Alaura, welcomed their daughter-in-law, Sara, and their granddaughter, Kayleigh.

Dave was a locksmith. David served in our church as a trustee and helped out by cutting the grass in season. It wasn't that long ago the after someone had broken into my office, that he changed the lock for me.

He lived out the words of 1 Peter 4:10: "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms." He is already missed.

After a prayer we will take a moment of memory, accompanied the hymn, Be Still, My Soul. Let me read the words of that hymn like a poem in his memory.

Be Still, My Soul

Be still, my soul! the Lord is on thy side;
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain;
Leave to thy God to order and provide;
In ev'ry change he faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul! thy best, thy heav'nly friend
Thru' thorny ways leads to a joyful end.

Be still, my soul! thy God doth undertake
To guide the future as he has the past;
Thy hope, thy confidence, let nothing shake;
all now mysterious shall be bright at last.
Be still, my soul! the waves and winds still know
His voice who ruled them while he dwelt below.

Be still, my soul! the hour is hast'ning on
When we shall be forever with the Lord,
When disappointment, grief, and fear are gone,
Sorrow forgot, love's purest joys restored.
Be still my soul! when change and tears are past,
All safe and blessed we shall meet at last.

Prayer

Music for reflection

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