

Matt 16:13-20  
“A Firm Foundation”

There has been and continues to be a considerable amount of talk about churches dying. And this has spawned work aimed at helping church's die well, as well as work focused on breathing new life into declining churches. I have recently started to question this language. Even more so when I consider this text. I have been wrestling with the question, “Do church's die?”. This morning, I want us to consider this possibility. Maybe it's not that a church dies but rather at some point in a congregation's life it stopped being the church. What I mean by this statement is that at some point in the life of that church something else became its foundation. Or stated this way, something else became its rock and thus, a slow decent of unusefulness to God, to Jesus, to Holy Spirit ensued. Unfortunately, the list of things, other than Jesus the Christ, that congregations allow to become their foundation, their reason for existence is long. Their history, their heritage, their facilities, their endowments, varying agendas, programs, denominational loyalties and so on. Oh, how many have allowed these things to become primary only to come to realize these things will not sustain them. That the foundation these things offer is all too flimsy. And we know anything built upon a shaky foundation will not stand the test of time. With these comments in mind, I want to share three important observations from our text this morning.

**First, it was not coincidental that Jesus asked this question in Caesarea Philippi. V13** <sup>13</sup> Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” In Jesus's day, Caesarea Philippi was a significant and bustling city located at the foot of Mount Hermon, known for its

religious and cultural diversity. Originally a center for the worship of the Greek god Pan, the city was home to a variety of temples and shrines dedicated to various deities, reflecting a mix of pagan traditions. Caesarea Philippi would not have been an easy place to claim allegiance to the true God, the God of our Lord Jesus the Christ. And it certainly would not have been friendly to individuals claiming Jesus as Lord. I can only imagine the temptation in such a place to temper the message of Christ. The temptation to find ways to harmonize Christ's claim with the claim of all the other gods (little g). In a place like this I imagine that the majority would be okay with generalized god talk. Not as comfortable with talk about Jesus. But it was in the place of competing gods (little g) and religious decadence that Jesus raises this critical question as if to say to his disciples who will it be and what will it be? Will it be them or me? What they say or what I say? And make no mistake about it, Jesus is still posing this question, and we are constantly answering by the choices we make as individuals and collectively as the church. And when our answers lead anyone to any conclusion about Jesus other than him being the Christ, the Son of the living God we answer wrong. Who do you say that I am? Do our answers, our theology, our allegiances, our activity lead us and others to conclude that we answer like Peter and in doing so are established upon a firm foundation? Brothers and Sisters, we are not far removed from the setting of Caesarea Philippi.

**Heb 3:5-6** “<sup>5</sup> Now Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that were to be spoken later, <sup>6</sup> but Christ is faithful over God's house as a son. And we are his house, if indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting in our hope.”

**Rev 2:4-5** “<sup>4</sup> But I have this against you, that you have abandoned the love you had at first. <sup>5</sup> Remember therefore from where you have

fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.”

**Second, to be the church, we must be sure in our profession of faith.**

**V-14-18a** “<sup>14</sup>And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” <sup>15</sup>He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” <sup>16</sup>Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” <sup>17</sup>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. <sup>18</sup>And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” I want each of us to seriously consider our view of Jesus and what informs and/or has shaped that view, whether it is scripture or some other source.

The rock that Jesus assures Peter that his church will be built upon is Peter’s profession that he is the Christ, the Son of the living God. This remains the rock! We may not be sure about many things scripturally, but we must be sure about who Jesus is. We cannot and we must not waver on this point. How others see Jesus should have zero bearing upon our profession of faith. Though down through the history of man some see him as a lunatic, some a charlatan, some nothing more than a good man, some a good moral example, and others not real at all we know him to be the Christ, the Son of the living God. We know him to be the lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. We know him to be the one who died on a hill called Calvary. We know him to be the one who rose on the third day. We know him to be the one who has ascended into heaven and is seated on the right hand of God the Father Almighty. We know him to be the way, the truth and the life. We know him to be the one who one day will return in all his glory for his church. And we know these things to be true not because we say so but because scripture declares it as so and by God’s Holy Spirit,

we know scripture to be true. To be the church, we must be sure, we must be resolute in our profession of faith for only then do we find ourselves established upon a firm foundation. Brothers and Sisters, Jesus is asking us, “Who do you say that I am?”

**John 13:13** “You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am.”

**1 Cor 12:2-3** “<sup>2</sup>You know that when you were pagans you were led astray to mute idols, however you were led. <sup>3</sup>Therefore I want you to understand that no one speaking in the Spirit of God ever says “Jesus is accursed!” and no one can say “Jesus is Lord” except in the Holy Spirit.”

**Third and final, the church is not dying. It never will nor can it. V18b**

“and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Buildings may close. Ministries may struggle to thrive. Resources may dwindle, but the church of our Lord and Savior Jesus the Christ is alive and well and will remain so. Let us never confuse what we build to be that which Christ, alone, has built. “And on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Confusion may abound but the church will stand. Divisions may grow wider, but the church will stand. Buildings may close and resources may dwindle but the church will stand. Pastors may fall and congregations may shrink but the church will stand. Bad theology and doctrine may abound, but the church will still stand. It’s influence in the public square may wane, but the church will stand. We Presbyterians may never be what we once were, but the church will stand! “And on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” No, the church is not dying. It never will nor can it for it is built upon a firm foundation. The question we are left with is this, “Are we on the firm foundation?”. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. **Amen.**