

The Secret to Build up the Church.

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I would like to begin this sermon with this passage from the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 16 verses 13 to 25:

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 you are John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets.
 He said to them, But whom say you that I am?
 And Simon Peter answered and said, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.
 And Jesus answered and said to him, Blessed are you, Simon Barjona:
 for flesh and blood has not revealed it to you, but my Father which is in heaven. And I say also to you, That you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give to you the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.
 Then charged he his disciples that they should tell no man that he was Jesus the Christ. From that time forth began Jesus to show to his disciples, how that he must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day.
 Then Peter took him, and began to rebuke him, saying, Be it far from you, Lord: this shall not be to you. But he turned, and said to Peter, Get you behind me, Satan: you are an offense to me: for you mind not the things that be of God, but those that be of men.
 Then said Jesus to his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever will save his life shall lose it: and whoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. (Matthew 16:13-25)
 [King James Version]

These verses we just read are one of the most important passages in the Bible. It clearly states the intention of Jesus and the purpose He is aiming at. That is to say, "I will build my congregation."

Jesus did not live without purpose. Actually, He always had one definite purpose or mission in His mind. He knew very well the mission given to Him for the days He lived on earth. Jesus had a definite purpose in life and He walked toward His death for the realization of this end. Although He resurrected three days after His death, He now sits on the throne in heaven; He is not just taking a rest up there. Jesus

sends the Holy Spirit into the world in order to complete the purpose He began to work for.

However, what is the purpose Jesus is trying to achieve?

As I just mentioned, Jesus clearly stated, "I will build my congregation." The purpose of Jesus is to build the congregation for Himself. The devil is also aware of this purpose; Jesus is trying to accomplish in this present age. If he doesn't, the devil would have no reason to resist this work of the Lord and try so desperately to hinder it. However, Jesus once said, "And I say also to you, That... I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18).

Throughout centuries until this day, those who attended such true churches have witnessed the surprisingly harsh attack from the devil on these churches. If Jesus is not capable of opening the eyes of our hearts and showing us the church as His ultimate purpose, the Lord would never dare call us the ones who are "after His own heart."

What is our purpose, after all? Do we keep in our mind the purpose the Lord has and think of it as much as the devil himself always keeps the same purpose of Jesus in mind? When people find a perishing soul, most of them seem to be satisfied by bringing them to the Lord, making them belong to some religious organization or society. However, it does not satisfy Jesus at all. Several decades ago, during the time we were active in the city of Naka-Minato, Ibaragi Prefecture, one sister said to me, which I still remember vividly. She said, "my most favorite phrase from the Bible is verse 23 of the Ephesians, chapter 1." Let me read it out;

...the church, which is his body, the fullness of him that fills all in all. (Ephesians 1:23)

Please go to a quiet room and read verses 15 to 23 of the first chapter of the Epistle to the Ephesians, praying, "Lord, please open the eyes of my heart again today."

Now, I would like to discuss with you the secret of building the true church from three perspectives. They are, firstly, "the three important facts," secondly, "the important question," and thirdly, "the materials required."

1. Three Important Facts.

To start with, there are three important facts, which need to be clearly understood. These are, that we need to have the new foundation, that the Cross needs to be there and that Jesus should have the absolute control of all things.

(1) Having the New Foundation.

Firstly, it is important for us to realize that church is built upon a totally new foundation. Where was He standing when Jesus said, "I will build my church?" It can be seen from the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 16, that it was somewhere in Caesarea Philippi. (Matthew 16:13). It was one of the most distant peripheral regions of the capital of Jerusalem located at the north end of lake Galilee. Why did it have to be in this Caesarea Philippi that Jesus stated His purpose in His own words, saying, "I will build my church?"

It was for no other reason than to tell the people that the purpose for which He came down to this world had absolutely nothing to do with the existing traditions, but was totally a new mission. In the Jewish society before the time of Jesus, there have been established religious organizations and various old traditions regarding their temples. However, Jesus made it very clear that His church would never be built upon these existing foundations. The new church needed to be the Church of Jesus. It was for this reason that Jesus had to start by building the new foundation. This new foundation was, needless to say, Jesus Himself. Peter clearly stated to Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." (Matthew 16:16).

In order for a church to be the church of Jesus, that church needs to be formed, neither on any worldly demands, lineages, nor any human desire, but on Jesus alone. Therefore, the true church should not be any sort of man-made organization. People can gather to form a religious club and learn the Bible in there; however, it cannot be regarded as the church or as the body of Jesus. The true church is one living organism that is born of the Lord God. If a church is born by tradition, through human power or if it is maintained by human efforts and worldly strength, it cannot be regarded as the true church of the Lord.

"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God:" This confession of Peter should be considered as the 'key' to solve the secret of building the true church. This confession suggests that the head of all churches is no one but Jesus. It goes without saying that, because Jesus who is the head of all churches came from above, the churches as the body of Jesus should also be born from above. The church is the congregation of those who are called out of this world. Therefore, a true church should not associate or pursue interest in this world.

Now, I would like to discuss briefly why the Cross is absolutely necessary in building the church.

(2) The Cross is Absolutely Necessary.

Caesarea Philippi, this region, which was so distant from the capital of Jerusalem has one distinctive

spiritual meaning for us. It was in this place that Jesus declared for the very first time that He was going to be crucified. It is described in this verse 21:

From that time forth began Jesus to show to his disciples, how that he must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day. (Matthew 16:21)

What did Jesus have to do to build up His own Church? The Lord Jesus explained it in His own words that, "He must suffer many things, be killed and raise again on the third day." Those who are willing to participate in Jesus' work to establish His Church need to start it by recognizing that Jesus had to be given over to death in order to actualize this purpose. It was not until Jesus gave up His own life that He began to establish His congregation. Therefore, it is true to say that it is only those who were crucified with Jesus that are privileged to work together with Him.

What is important for us is neither to contemplate through human efforts what the churches of the New Testament should be like, nor to make plans on how to realize these objectives. The most important thing is to be crucified with Jesus so that our bodies will be given over to death. We need to be able to say what Paul has stated, "I am crucified with Christ. nevertheless I live. yet not I, but Christ lives in me." (Galatians 2:20)

What is required from us in building the church of Jesus is not only to participate in services for the Lord, but also to bear the cross and follow the Lord.

Then said Jesus to his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. (Matthew 16:24)

What is it that marks the beginning of building up a true church?

The true church of the Lord starts to be built up when we believers truly understand the intention of the Lord and prepare ourselves to endure all kinds of troubles, sufferings, tribulations and misunderstandings. There are so many people who are willing to work enthusiastically for the Lord and serve Him, but they do not truly understand the intention of the Lord, that is expressed in His Word, "I will build my congregation." It is horrible, isn't it? Some people proclaim the truth of the Lord filled with joy, but they are not truly prepared to take up the cross of Jesus and follow Him wherever He goes.

The Lord once said, "The harvest is vast, but the workers are few." However, the most serious problem of this present time is not that there are too few workers. The quality of the workers rather than their quantity is what matters. Jesus chose to die in

order to establish the foundation of His church. It is not until we are crucified with the Lord and surrender all things to the Lord that we will be prepared to start building the church of the Lord, with the Lord.

(3) Absolute Control by Jesus.

Jesus has never said, "I will build a congregation." He said "I will build my congregation." Jesus has accepted us to participate in the work of establishing the church with Him. However, nobody in this world is allowed to possess the church and keep it as their own property. The church of Jesus belongs to no one but Jesus and its ownership is in the hands of Jesus alone.

Jesus has never said that He would build His Church for some specific missionary, organization or nation. Jesus builds His Church just for Himself.

Many people say, "I work for the Lord and I bear the responsibility of the church", but humans can not provide the church to the Lord. Jesus once said that He would prepare His own church by Himself for Himself. It is in this often-cited verse 27 of the Ephesians, chapter 5:

That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. (Ephesians 5:27)

The ownership of the church does not belong to any particular organization or nation. The church belongs to no one but Jesus. The church is not a property of some missionaries or pastors; it belongs to the Lord alone. It is written that the church is the temple of the Spirit, the dwelling of the Lord God, a bride of Jesus the Son of God. Let me read this verse from the third chapter of the First Epistle of Timothy, which is a letter Paul wrote to his beloved disciple, Timothy:

But if I tarry long, that you may know how you ought to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth. (1 Timothy 3:15)

This verse helps us to understand that it is neither how the church should be led, how the church should be managed, nor how the church should be supported that truly matters to us, but we should pay much attention to the kind of life we ourselves live and how we lead others in the house of God. A true Church is the house of God and it is where the Lord God Himself dwells. Every corner of the true church belongs to the Lord. Therefore, the one who governs the Church should be Jesus alone. Jesus is not a guest invited to the church, but He is the head of the church as well as its governor, which means that the church should be a place where the will of Jesus is realized and the intention of Jesus fulfilled.

So far, we have discussed the three things that we absolutely need to understand. Firstly, we learned that the foundation of a true church is not any existing tradition or man-made organization, but it needs to be the new foundation, which is Jesus Himself. Because Jesus, as the head of a true church came from heaven, the church as His body has to be born from above too. A true church, which is a heavenly organism, has nothing to do with any kind of worldly thing. Secondly, we learned that only those who have died with Jesus and those who are determined to take up His Cross and follow Him every day are allowed to participate in the Divine work of establishing a true church. And finally, that true church should be characterized by the absolute governance of Jesus alone. It should be the same for us too; we should neither belong to nor be owned by any specific person, any man-made organization or specific divine denomination, but our whole being should be dedicated to Jesus.

So far, we have learned about the three important points for building a true church and now I would like to start a brief discussion about the second subject, which is "the critical question."

2. The Critical Question

The critical question which is directed towards us here is if we are Christians who work with Jesus or those who hinder the work of Jesus.

Jesus, who has said, "I will build my congregation," is the only Person who has the power to build this temple of the Spirit. It can never be built by humans. We can work together with the Lord. However, the choice should always be made by the Lord. Humans are not allowed to decide where to build the church at their will.

Even Paul could not build a church by himself. Paul was born in a place called Tarsus, which was a relatively big city in those days. There is no doubt that Paul testified and preached the Gospel in this town too. Paul personally must have wanted to build a church in his home town. However, being guided by Barnabas, Paul eventually traveled from Tarsus to Antioch, where he established a magnificent church. It goes without saying that the Lord has worked there and this fact indicates that Paul had to follow the guidance of the Lord, even as to where he should work and he was not allowed to work in the place of his choice. Paul knew very well about the purpose and the plan the Lord had. He understood very well that Jesus would build His own church all by Himself. Because of this, Paul surrendered himself completely to Jesus and entrusted himself to His guidance and constantly took this attitude; "I no longer live, but the Messiah lives in me." We too should have a strong desire to work for the Lord the way Paul did. If somehow or the other, we hinder the work of Jesus and cannot be used by Him anymore,

we must acknowledge that it is indeed a horrible tragedy; it is a disaster.

There are three things that tie the hands of the Lord and disturb the work of the Lord. Firstly, the spirit of self-centered thought, secondly, the spirit that is divided into two, and thirdly, is a narrow heart, a narrow spirit that refuses to accept others.

(1) The Spirit of Self-centered Thought.

Now, let us begin with the discussion about the spirit of self-centered thought. Jesus did not say, "I will build you." But, He said, "I will build my congregation." Of course, Jesus always blesses us. But, He blesses us so as to spread the blessing to other people through us.

If we ask and seek for our own blessings, it will tie the hands of Jesus working to build His congregation and hinder the work of the Lord. Right after Jesus said, "I will build my congregation," Peter did something that could hinder the work of the Lord. Peter was only thinking about himself. When Jesus told him that He would have to go to the Cross, what came up in Peter's mind was that, if Jesus dies on the Cross, he too would lose the meaning of his life, which made Peter suggest for Jesus to avoid being crucified. By making himself the center of everything, Peter ended up hindering the work of Jesus.

(2) The Divided Spirit.

A spirit that is divided internally also hinders the work of the Lord. We should not make any compromise in obeying the the instructions of the Lord. For churches to continue to be built up, all those who were led and saved by the grace of the Lord need to be united with each other by means of the bond of peace and there must be fellowship of love among them. This is not an easy thing to do; it is actually extremely difficult for us to have true love. However, no matter how difficult it may look, instead of being discouraged, we need to keep in mind the fact that the grace of the Lord makes all things possible.

The truth cannot be bent for the purpose of achieving an agreement with other people. We should never compromise ourselves and conform to the opinion of those who oppose the will of the Lord to have a fellowship with them. However, on the other hand, we cannot take an attitude of no love towards some certain brothers and sisters for the sake of pursuing the truth.

Even when you are faced with people who express different opinion from yours, you should neither disrespect them nor judge them. With love and bond of peace, we always need to be united with each other to form one single Spirit. This is true love, without which the church as Jesus' body cannot

continue to be built up. Building up a church is not a simple task.

In addition to the self-centered spirit and the divided spirit, we are going to see that a narrow heart, a narrow spirit that refuses to accept others, also hinder the work of the Lord.

(3) Narrow Heart, Narrow Spirit that Refuses to Accept Others

A narrow spirit acts as an obstacle in building up the church of Jesus.

The eyes of the Lord is looking over every church in every corner of this world and He is looking for places or location to build His church. However, Jesus has never said, "I will build a lot of congregation of my own." As we can see from His words, "I will build my congregation," He is willing to build only one church. This "one and only" church of Jesus is universal in its nature and it covers the entire world.

Some people are attempting to build a church of Japan. And some of them even insist to exclude foreign people from Japanese church and build churches only for Japanese people. These people claim that it should be Japanese people that take the responsibility in the church in Japan, but they do not understand that church should not belong to any specific nation, person or organization, the church belongs to Jesus alone. If they fail to see in the eyes of their hearts what a true church is, they will lose the opportunity to become true workers for the Lord. The spirit with such narrow heart also ties Jesus' hands and hinders His work.

Finally, let us discuss the "materials required" to build the church.

3. The Required Materials

What kind of material should be used to build the church? It is a man like Peter that is required to build the church. Jesus said to Peter, "you are Peter," which was soon followed by the next words, "I will build my congregation." By the revelation from above, Peter was shown what kind of person Jesus was, which then altered what kind of person Peter was. It is only those who understand the Lord the same way Peter did by the revelation from above that can be used by the Lord as materials to build the church.

Let me read again the verse that we read at the beginning of this sermon:

And Jesus answered and said to him. Blessed are you, Simon Barjona. for flesh and blood has not revealed it to you, but my Father which is in heaven. (Matthew 16:17)

Jesus always called Peter, "Simon son of Jonah." Now, what kind of person was Jonah, father of Simon? The Bible did not say anything about Peter's father. Nobody knows what kind of man he was. Simon actually was a child of an unknown person. Actually, Peter too was nobody. Just like Peter, the Lord always takes up ordinary people who have nothing to be proud of and use them in building His church.

Jesus could not call on Simon while he relied on his innate ability because he would never be able to support the work of the Lord, but would rather hinder the work of the Lord. However, Jesus did not judge Simon from his natural characteristics; instead, He was aware that He would be able to transform this useless Simon by His blessing. Simon did not remain as Simon, son of Jonah forever. Eventually, Simon was altered and was called by the Lord, "you are Peter." Peter was reborn as a new man in Christ.

Peter confessed to Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied him, "And I say also to you, That you are Peter."

By knowing Jesus, humans' hearts are changed. If we understand the kind of things Jesus has done for us and the kind of work He still does inside us, if we live based on this knowledge, Jesus can use us as materials to build His church. Jesus uses people like Peter in building His church. Here, people like Peter referred to those who stand firm and cannot be moved; they are strong and spiritual people.

(1) Stable Man Who Stands Firm.

A man like Simon was transformed into a man called Peter by the blessing of the Lord. This name, Peter means 'rock,' and he actually was changed to a man who literally is like a rock, cannot be moved by anything at all. In order for the church to be built up, a man like Peter is required, who has an unshakable personality and always takes an uncompromising attitude in all things.

Actually, Peter used to be an unreliable person, who was unstable as sea sand. He was the kind of person, who, at one point, cared about his Lord, but at the next moment, he took off his eyes off from the Lord and began to worry about how people would think of him. Just after Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood has not revealed it to you, but my Father which is in heaven," He had to say, "Get you behind me, Satan: you are an offense to me: for you mind not the things that be of God, but those that be of men": Peter used to be such an unstable person. Even when he was shown through the revelation from above, that Jesus was the Son of God, he immediately fell into the hands of the devil. This indicates that his personality was so weak and he was such an unreliable person. How

could this Simon be transformed into a person like Peter?

He was changed through the experience of the Cross and the Pentecost. We all humans were born with inherently evil nature. Even the best nature that each person was born with is totally useless in the mission to build the true church of the Lord. Unless we go through the same experience like Paul, which makes us realize that, "we no longer live, but the Messiah lives in us," and we are determined to entrust our entire lives to the control of the Holy Spirit, we will have to remain in an unstable condition as soft sands like Simon used to and would never be able to take firm steps and stand as immovable rocks. Jesus could not entrust Himself completely to the disciples because they had not yet gone through the experience of the Pentecost. It was for this reason that the Lord had to order them not to tell anyone that He was the Christ. It is in verse 20, "Then charged he his disciples that they should tell no man that he was Jesus the Christ." All His disciples were untrustworthy and self-centered people by then. How can we become trustworthy and stand firm? Let me read verse 24, "Then said Jesus to his disciples, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me."

It was not until Peter went through the Cross and the Pentecost that he became a man who was just like a rock and could never be moved by anything. Peter did not call himself, Peter (rock). This is a name given by the Lord. No matter how much effort we make by ourselves, we cannot transform ourselves into reliable persons. Let us read some verses from Matthew, chapter 26:

Peter answered and said to him. Though all men shall be offended because of you, yet will I never be offended. Jesus said to him. Verily I say to you. That this night, before the cock crow, you shalt deny me thrice. Peter said to him. Though I should die with you, yet will I not deny you. Likewise also said all the disciples. (Matthew 26:33-35)

And after a while came to him they that stood by, and said to Peter, Surely you also are one of them. for your speech bewrays you. Then began he to curse and to swear, saying. I know not the man. And immediately the cock crew. (Matthew 26:73-74)

Jesus chose the new name Peter, for Simon by Himself, which showed that He had the power to transform an unstable person like Simon into a man as immovable as a rock. Not only his name, but the personality of Peter was completely changed. The Lord builds up His Church through those who went through the same experience. Those who remain in the weakness which they were born with obstruct the

work of the Lord and bind His hands. It is only those who have been liberated from the self through the Cross and have entrusted themselves completely to the control of the Spirit that the Lord desires to use in building His church. If we cannot be transformed this way, our fellowship will simply remain as a gathering of good friends and will never form a true church.

(2) Strong Man

Peter, who stands firm and cannot be moved by anything, is also a person of a very strong mind.

Another characteristic of 'rock' is in its strength.

Paul prayed in his epistle to the Ephesians, "I pray that he would give you, according to his glorious riches, strength in your inner being and power through his Spirit." (Ephesians 3:16) If we want to form the church that fulfills the purpose of the Lord, we need the strength given by the Lord. Simon did not have this strength of the Lord God. Although when he was given a new name Peter, which made him determine to follow the Lord completely, what he actually did was the total opposite. He denied Jesus three times. Although, Peter himself was not a very weak person, he did not have enough strength to resist the power of the devil who tempted to pull him back and put him down.

However, as the Lord said, the Holy Spirit was poured on Peter the day of Pentecost and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. Even after the Pentecost, the power of the devil worked on him as strong as before, but Jesus, as He has promised, built the church against which even the Hades could not prevail. Actually, this battle continues to this day. We want to be united with each other, live in the one spirit so that we can be built up into a church that can be acknowledged by the Lord as a true church, don't we? It will be a great blessing for us if the Lord makes us strong by the Cross and the Holy Spirit.

(3) Spiritual Man

Not only was Peter a stable man standing firmly, a strong man, but he was also a spiritual man. We can find a description of a spiritual rock in chapter ten of the Epistle to the Corinthians.

And did all drink the same spiritual drink. for they drank of that spiritual Rock that followed them. and that Rock was Christ. (1 Corinthians 10:4)

It is stated that the rock is the spirit (the spiritual rock). Peter had to go through the critical stage of being transformed from a believer who was bound to his flesh to a true spiritual believer. When Peter attempted to work for the Lord with human thought, Jesus had to call him an offense to Him.

The church of Jesus is called 'a spiritual house.'

You also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. (1 Peter 2:5)

If the church is 'a spiritual house,' all believers that are connected to it should also be spiritual people. I suppose that most of the people here do not understand correctly what it means to be spiritual. They seem to have their own vague ideas as to what it is to be spiritual, which is not right. Jesus was truly a spiritual person. Jesus always spoke truthfully what was in His mind and put into action what He preached exactly as it was spoken. Jesus taught us through His own life that it is what the Lord God wants from us that we obey His word and His will faithfully with deeds as well as words.

The true church that Jesus is trying to build up is the community where all brothers and sisters worship together and pray with one united heart. To that end, each brother and sister, as the limbs connected to this body needs to be spiritual. They need to share the same spirit, the same Life, same intention and dedicate their hearts for the glory of the Lord. Therefore, building up the church of Jesus should primarily be an internal and spiritual matter and external forms should be the secondary or third consideration. It is vital for brothers and sisters to be filled with the Holy Spirit and transformed into the image of the Lord day by day, from hour to hour. Let us wish to become people with such desire. Let us hope that we will be the church that is filled with the fullness of the Lord and the church that is transformed into the image of the Lord. And as a member of Jesus' body, every one of us should continue to fill this body of Jesus until no part is missing from this Body.