

Who knows more about the current needs of the church – Christ or man?

Who can provide better for the church – Christ or man?

From whom did the original idea of the church come – Christ or man?

In whom rests the church's future hope – Christ or man?

Who built the church up until now – Christ or man?

Whom do we trust for future direction – Christ or man?

Who owns and sustains the church – Christ or man?

For whose glory does the church exist – Christ or man?

Who is the head of the church – Christ or man?

Because 'Christ' is the correct answer to each of these questions, we turn to Matthew 16:18 where Jesus delivers at least seven hallmark principles for building the church. No one should launch out in planning a new church or take on the risk of revitalizing a worn-out church until the defining truths of this Scripture have gripped one's heart and mind.

Tomorrow's hope

Hallmark 1

The initial characteristic involves a *permanent foundation*. Christ passionately pursued the lasting fruit of eternity. In His promise, He explicitly looked to an everlasting legacy. Jesus did not have in mind the temporary, the faddish, or the 'here today, gone tomorrow'. He pointed to the church as having a 'forever' relevance.

'I also say that you are Peter, and *upon this rock* I will build My church.' The foundation wasn't Peter, because Christ here distinguishes between a moveable rock/detached boulder (the basic meaning of Cephas and Peter) and the unshakeable, immovable foundation suitable for the church. The word Christ used for 'rock' means bedrock or mass of rock as used by the wise builder (Matt. 7:24-25).

What or who then is the rock? The Old Testament pictures God as a rock in whom we find strength and refuge:

There is no-one holy like the LORD,
Indeed, there is no-one besides Thee,
Nor is there any rock like our God (1 Sam. 2:2).

The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer,
My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge ... (Ps. 18:2).

For who is God, but the LORD?
And who is a rock, except our God? (Ps. 18:31).

Paul identifies Christ as the rock in the wilderness (1 Cor. 10:4). Earlier in 1 Corinthians (3:11), the Apostle wrote, 'For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Christ Jesus'.

Interestingly, one verse earlier Paul had claimed, 'I laid a foundation ...'. How did Paul 'lay' Christ as the foundation? Obviously, it had to be in his preaching of Christ (1 Cor. 2:1-2). Now, if Paul's testimony of Christ is the foundation that no one else can lay, then it seems best to understand the 'bedrock foundation' of the church to be Peter's testimony of Christ, 'Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God' (Matt. 16:16). Remember, Peter's declaration prompted Jesus' promise.

Since it is virtually impossible to separate the testimony of Christ from the reality of Christ, we can identify the 'rock' as Christ Himself in the fullness of His deity, His role as redeemer, and His headship in the church. Christ alone is the rock of redemption upon which the church is being built (Acts 4:11-12).

Hallmark 2

Secondly, Christ promised His *personal involvement*. 'I will build My church.' We have not been left to the task alone. Christ is in us (Col. 1:27), with us (Matt. 28:20), and amongst His church constantly (Rev. 1:12-13, 20).

Paul told the Corinthian church, 'For we are God's fellow workers ...' (1 Cor. 3:9). What a privilege to be partners with Christ in building His church. How comforting to know He built the church before we arrived and He will continue to build long after we're gone. Christ's participation proves indispensable in raising up His church.

Hallmark 3

'I will build My church.' This is no idle dream about what might be. Christ's confident assertion guarantees that the church has a *positive expectation*. In times like these when the future of the church looks bleak and its condition uncertain, this powerful promise should buoy up our spirits. The church will be triumphant because Christ began building the church with the intention of completing her (Eph. 5:26-27).

Hallmark 4

Jesus claimed that His church will have a *powerful advance*. 'I will build My church.' The church experienced an explosive beginning with 3,000 members being added on the first day (Acts 2:41). 'And the Lord was adding to their numbers day by day those who were being saved' (Acts 2:47).

What is contained in one mere sentence in Matthew 16 mushrooms into an expansive reality by the time of John's Revelation. Before the New Testament ends, churches existed across the face of the Roman Empire. They included locations like Rome, Corinth, Thessalonica, Philippi, Colossae, Laodicea, Ephesus, Galatia, Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Antioch, Jerusalem, Crete, Cyprus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Caesarea, Berea, and Joppa. His building efforts continue to this very hour, everywhere in the world, just as He intended (Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47).

Hallmark 5

Christ bought the church with His own blood and therefore possesses the exclusive *paid-in-full ownership* of the church

(Acts 20:28). ‘I will build *My* church.’ Christ is Lord; we are His servants (2 Cor. 4:5). Paul writes to the believers in Rome, ‘All the churches of Christ greet you’ (Rom. 16:16). Make no mistake about this – we do not (corporately or individually) have any ownership claim to the church. The church belongs uniquely to its Redeemer (1 Cor. 3:23; 6:19-20). Christ is Head of the church (Eph. 1:22; 5:23). The Chief Shepherd owns the flock that He leads (John 10:14-15).

Hallmark 6

‘I will build *My church*.’ For Christ, the church has a *people-centred priority*. The church comprises an assembly of people who have believed in Jesus Christ for eternal life (Acts 4:32). Jesus uses living stones – individual people – to build His church (1 Pet. 2:5). The mandate of evangelization is to take the gospel to all the nations (Luke 24:47). The goal of edification is to present everyone complete in Christ (Col. 1:28).

The Greek word translated ‘church’ literally means the congregation which has been called out. The New Testament pictures the church as made up of those who have been delivered out of the kingdom of darkness and transferred to the kingdom of Christ (Col. 1:13). The Thessalonians had turned from idols to serve a true and living God (1 Thess. 1:9). The church has been called into fellowship with Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 1:9). Christ has called His redeemed out of darkness into His marvellous light (1 Pet. 2:9).

Hallmark 7

Jesus has *promised success* to the church. ‘I will build *My* church; and *the gates of Hades shall not overpower it*.’

How is this success to be understood? In the Old Testament ‘gates of’ is used with Sheol (Isa. 38:10) and death (Job 38:17; Ps. 9:13; 107:18), both referring to physical death. ‘Death’ is really the only enemy that could ‘potentially’ overpower and defeat the church since she is comprised of people who shall live, even if they die (John 11:25).

The writer of Hebrews encourages us to know that through death Christ rendered powerless him who had the power of death, that is the devil (2:14). Paul wrote this Christian victory song to the Corinthians:

But when this perishable will have put on the imperishable, and this mortal will have put on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written, 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is your victory? O Death, where is your sting?' The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law; but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:54-57).

When Christ builds the church these seven features will be identifiable:

1. Christ as the permanent foundation.
2. Christ's personal involvement.
3. Christ's positive expectation.
4. Christ's purpose of powerful advance.
5. Christ's paid-in-full ownership.
6. Christ's people-centred priority.
7. Christ's promise of success.

Who could possibly want to build the church any other way?

Christ's unfinished work

Theologians often speak of Christ's 'finished work' on the cross, referring to the work of redemption. Christ cried out on the cross, 'It is finished!' (John 19:30). Truly, Christ's sacrifice need not be offered again (Heb. 7:27; 9:12). This is the finished work of Christ.

However, more is in view for the church than just Christ's death and resurrection. Dr. Luke wrote his gospel concerning 'all that Jesus began to do and teach' (Acts 1:1). Just before ascending into heaven, Jesus told his disciples to be witnesses of Him to the remotest part of the earth (Acts 1:8). Reaching the lost

with the gospel and then adding to the church daily until Christ returns is the unfinished work of building Christ's church.

What we are to be doing and how we are to do it in building Christ's church is the subject of this volume. By God-breathed, infallible revelation, Christ has communicated to us what He thinks about the church. The Scriptures particularize what He commends and specify what He condemns. No-one need ever be in doubt over how to go about the unfinished work of building Christ's church or what the outcome will be.

In the end, our work in building the church on behalf of Christ will be acclaimed as valuable – the allusion to gold, silver and precious stones – or worthless – the allusion to wood, hay, and straw (1 Cor. 3:12). The *quality* of each man's work will be tested by Christ in the end (1 Cor. 3:13). Our eternal reward for service done on earth depends on building the church with biblical excellence in order to please Christ.

In the Academy Award-winning film *Chariots of Fire*, Eric Liddell, famed Olympian and missionary to China, conversed with his sister Jenny on a Scottish moor about the timing of his return to missionary work. His response remains etched in my memory. 'I believe that God made me for a purpose – for China – but He also made me fast. And when I run I feel His pleasure.'

Nothing will bring Christ greater pleasure than the building of His church. So, aim your life at the bull's-eye mark of His pleasure and you will never miss the spiritual target. You'll not be disappointed, and neither will Christ. Your heart will be filled with a great sense of commitment, as expressed by the words below, to build Christ's church his way.

I rise up to worship, I stand to acclaim
The King of all ages, Christ Jesus His name.
I ask you, King Jesus, fulfill this desire,
Ignite me and make me, a chariot of fire.
Come rule all my life
Lord Jesus Christ, be Master and King.
Come rule all my life,
Lord Jesus Christ, be my everything.