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# THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CHURCH

All of us are familiar with the story of Humpty Dumpty, the figure from the children’s nursery rhyme whose world was shattered after he had a great fall. He called on the best his world had to offer to address his problem—“all the king’s horses and all the king’s men.” We would say today that Humpty had the White House, the Congress, the military, and any other human power or authority you can think of coming to his aid in his brokenness.

But the tragedy of the story is that none of these human powers could put Humpty Dumpty’s life and world back together again. Apparently Mr. Dumpty had no biblically functioning church available to help him, because if he had he would not have had to call on the king in the first place.

Now it’s one thing when a nursery rhyme character cannot find the help he needs to repair his shattered world, even when his problem is being attended to by the highest authorities the culture has

to offer. But it's another thing altogether when real people in the real world discover that all the king's horses and all the king's men—human institutions of power and influence—can't fix society's deepest problems and address people's deepest needs.

This is where the church comes in, because the church is the most important institution on earth. The church, and only the church, has been commissioned by the sovereign Lord to be His representative agency in history. It has been given sole authority to unlock the treasures of the spiritual realm so that they can be brought to bear on the realities of earth.

Thus, as the church goes so goes everything else. God designed the church to be the epicenter of culture, and the church's strength or weakness is a major determining factor in the success or failure of human civilization. When the church is strong, the culture is impacted positively—even if the “powers that be” in a particular place don't realize that impact and seek to marginalize and persecute the church. But when the church is weak, its influence deteriorates and so does the culture.

One example of the church's impact, both positively and negatively, is the institution of slavery in America. Many segments of American culture condoned and sanctioned slavery, even though it served as the catalyst for a civil war that cost thousands of lives and helped produce ongoing cultural upheaval. And Christendom at large helped provide justification for slavery, even leading some to find a basis for slavery in Scripture. But, in the end, it was the strength of the true church bringing its influence to bear that helped lead to the collapse of slavery.

It is important to understand the church's importance for cultural reasons, since Jesus called His people to be salt and light, a city on a hill. But understanding the church's nature and mission is even more important for spiritual reasons. That's because the church has been given the assignment of growing all of its members into mature believers who can disciple others and maximize their spiritual potential.

When the church is strong, its members recognize their eternal

purpose and the church moves forward. But when the church is weak, its members tend to wander around in confusion on their spiritual pilgrimage. My purpose and prayer for this book is that it will contribute to our understanding of the church, so that instead of being Humpty Dumpty's lying in ruins with no one to help us, we will become dynamic followers of Jesus Christ and contributing members of His church.

**A GOD-SIZED PROBLEM**

Talking about the church may bring certain verses from the Bible to your mind. But I want to begin our discussion of the church in what seems like an unusual place—not in the words of Jesus or the writings of Paul, but in an obscure Old Testament passage in which we find a God-sized problem that will help us answer the question of why the church is so important in God's plan today.

Before we go to this passage, let me give you a foundational principle for this chapter and this book, which is simply this: Everything that is physical and visible—the world and life around us—is controlled by things that are invisible and spiritual. This has always been the case, in fact. We need to get this order straight because the only real way to fix what is wrong in the visible and physical realm is to make sure that the invisible and spiritual realm is working right. Until the invisible is operating properly, the visible cannot be addressed in any lasting and effective way. This is why society can go on for years and even centuries without seeing very basic and destructive problems being solved, no matter how much clout and money we throw at those issues.

***A Time of Great Chaos***

Keeping this principle in mind, I want to deal with our passage, 2 Chronicles 15:3–6, where the writer looks back to an earlier period in Israel's history. The prophet Azariah was urging King Asa of Judah to continue the reforms he had begun. To reinforce

his message, Azariah reminded Asa of the sad condition God's people were in during an earlier age, which many Bible commentators believe was the period of the judges. If so, Azariah was speaking of Israel's low point spiritually when he said, "For many days Israel was without the true God and without a teaching priest and without law" (v. 3).

Verse 4 refers to those times when Israel sought God during that period, but in verses 5–6 the prophet summarized those days of chaos and God's judgment: "In those times there was no peace to him who went out or to him who came in, for many disturbances afflicted all the inhabitants of the lands. Nation was crushed by nation, and city by city, for God troubled them with every kind of distress."

Several things from these verses are worth noting. For instance, the description of a society in the grip of violence, crime, and conflict between nations sounds like our world today, so we know there's a lesson for us here. Like the world of ancient Israel, our culture is also in chaos and confusion.

But what ought to grab your attention is the statement in verse 6 that this all came about because "God troubled" the people. We might have expected Azariah to say that this mess was the result of satanic activity and influence in the world. According to the prophet, however, God was the author of this confusion among the people, although He was not in any way the author of their sin that provoked His judgment.

In other words, these problems that were tearing apart the fabric of society had a spiritual cause. So to address the lack of peace on a social level, try to deal with violence and crime through more law enforcement, or settle conflicts between governments at the bargaining table would not be sufficient because the people's problem was with God. And when God is your problem, God alone is your solution.

What was it about this period of Israel's history that caused God to "trouble" His people with distress at so many levels? The root of the problem is found in 2 Chronicles 15:3. Three key elements that are necessary to keep God's people on track spiritually were missing.



***A Lack of True Knowledge***

The first of these elements was the lack of “the true God.” This does not say that God had withdrawn Himself from Israel so that the people forgot who He was or could no longer find Him. Even in the days of the judges, there was religious service going on in Israel. People were offering sacrifices to God. But it was not the kind of authentic religion that pleased God or produced the right kind of response from Him.

We could say that the Israelites had forgotten the kind of holy God they were serving, so they thought nothing of going off into idolatry or mixing with pagans or violating His law in a dozen other ways. Israel was living as if it couldn’t tell the one true God from the many false gods around it. Spiritual activity was going on, but it wasn’t true to God’s requirements.

***A Lack of Biblical Teaching***

What could have caused God’s people to get all confused about the nature of God and start mixing the true with the false? In the case before us, the second phrase of 2 Chronicles 15:3 gives us a large clue. In those days, “Israel was . . . without a teaching priest.” We would say today that the nation had a very serious pastoral problem—a mist in the pulpit that became a fog in the pew, as we’ll see later.

Notice that the text does not say that Israel had no priests. The problem was that the priests were not carrying out their function of teaching God’s law so the people would know the true God and what He expected of them. The priests were doing an inadequate job of providing a divine viewpoint through which the people could interpret all of life and make God-honoring decisions.

Now don’t misunderstand. People are responsible for their own relationship to God and their obedience to His revealed will, especially in a day like today when we each have a copy of God’s Word and the ability to read it. But I’m talking about a systemic spiritual failure at the heart of Israel’s spiritual leadership that kept the people

uninformed and ill-informed about their responsibility before God and the consequences of failing to meet it.

### ***A Lack of Correct Application***

The third problem mentioned in 2 Chronicles 15:3 follows as a natural consequence of the first two. Because the people didn't know their God intimately and were not hearing His Word taught, they were "without law." That is, they didn't know how to apply God's law to the situations they faced. The divine rules weren't being applied, so people made up their own.

The last phrase of the last verse of the book of Judges illustrates this problem perfectly: "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). Everybody had an idea of what to do, but nothing worked because God's government of His people was not being upheld and enforced.

We hear a lot today about the separation of church and state. They ought to be separate because they are two distinct institutions with two distinct jurisdictions. But what cannot be separated is God and His role in society, because people will always live by some governing principle, whether good or bad.

The people of Israel didn't know how to bring God's truth to bear on their world, and the practical result was that they lived as if no divine framework existed at all.

Look at our nation today. How can we have all of these churches on every corner with all of these preachers and programs and facilities, and yet still have such moral and spiritual chaos in our culture? It's because we, as God's people, aren't bringing His Word and His power to bear on the world around us, so people are living as if God doesn't exist. But that's another issue, and we'll come back to it later.

## **A GOD-ORDAINED SOLUTION**

Since the basic realities of spiritual conflict and the superior power of the spiritual world haven't changed since the days of the



judges in ancient Israel, we see the same principle of the visible world being controlled by the invisible world at work today. Paul gave us one of the clearest statements of this reality in Ephesians 6:12 when he said, “Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.”

This is also a great statement of why the church is central to God’s plan. God has always had a vehicle or an agency on earth to make His presence manifest, carry out His will, and bring what is invisible and spiritual down to the world of the visible and the physical.

Israel’s system of the law, the sacrifices, and the priesthood was God’s agency to accomplish His program on earth in the Old Testament. Today that agency is the church and only the church. Now that doesn’t mean God cannot reveal Himself to someone apart from the visible presence of a church. But the Bible is clear that the church is the entity that brings the realm of heaven into history and brings the values of heaven to bear on earth. To put it another way, the church is the answer to Jesus’ prayer, “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

### ***Jesus’ Promise of the Church***

We can make this statement because Jesus Himself revealed His future plan in a crucial discussion with His disciples that took place early in His ministry. The first time the Bible mentions a subject is very significant, and the first time the church is mentioned is on the lips of Jesus in His time with the disciples (Matthew 16:13–19) as He prophesied the church’s coming. The Greek word Jesus used here is *ekklēsia*, which means “called out ones.” It was also used of an assembly, so the idea is that the church is a special assembly of people called out from the world to become part of God’s family. This definition is critical for our understanding of the church as *people* instead of just an institution or a collection of buildings.

My purpose in looking at these familiar verses in Matthew 16

is to focus on Jesus' teaching concerning the church and the authority He gave the church to carry out His plan. Jesus had taken the disciples and traveled north for a time of retreat to get away from the crowds. It was while they were alone that Jesus raised the all-important question, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (v. 13). Then He asked, more specifically, "But who do *you* say that I am?" (v. 15, italics added).

Before we get into this text, I want to point out that both of Jesus' questions (vv. 13 and 15) were directed to the Twelve as a group. It's not obvious in the English text, but the word *you* in verse 15 is plural in the Greek. This fact is important for what Jesus was about to say concerning the church.

The disciples offered several names in answer to the question of what the people at large were saying about Jesus (v. 14). His ministry did have features in common with John the Baptist, Elijah, and Jeremiah, so the people weren't completely off-base. But the important thing was who Jesus' disciples believed Him to be. So Peter stepped forward as the leader and spokesman and declared, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (v. 16). The clear implication is that the other eleven disciples agreed with him. Peter was saying, "Lord, we've just been discussing this and have come to the conclusion that You are Israel's promised Messiah and Savior."

Jesus blessed Peter for this confession (v. 17), which the disciples didn't really arrive at on their own, but which came to them by revelation from God the Father. Before we go on to verse 18 and Jesus' prophecy of the church, I want you to see how important it is that the disciples were in agreement on the person of Jesus. They became the leaders and foundation stones of the church (see Ephesians 2:20). The church is a body of people who are absolutely convinced that Jesus is the one-and-only Son of God and Savior of the world.

Now we come to the heart of the passage as far as the church is concerned. In Matthew 16:18, Jesus followed up His affirmation of Peter's confession by saying, "I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it."

The Church's Foundation

This is not only one of the most important statements about the church in the Bible, but also one of the most controversial. Some people teach that Peter himself is the rock on which the church is built, but that's not what Jesus said. He used a play on words here that is important to understand because it gives us the clue to Jesus' meaning.

"Peter" is the word *Petros*, a masculine form of the word for a stone. But the word *rock* that Jesus used next in Matthew 16:18 is *petra*, which is a feminine form of the same word. This word was used in classical Greek of a collection of stones knitted together to form a larger rock, such as a ledge or a slab. It meant many stones joined together to form a rock that is far larger and more significant than any one stone could be.

This is a great picture of the church. Elsewhere Paul likened it to a human body in which all the individual parts are knit together to form one whole (see 1 Corinthians 12:12; Ephesians 4:16). The analogy is different, but the point is the same. The church is not built on Peter alone, but on Peter, the other apostles, and all those who believe and confess that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God" coming together to form this larger entity called the church.

One strong support for this view is the later statement of Peter himself. Since he was there that day and heard what Jesus said, and since he obviously had access to much more teaching from the Lord that we don't have, Peter would be the best interpreter of what Jesus meant. So how did Peter describe the church in his own writings under the Holy Spirit's inspiration? He called the church "living stones [that] are being built up as a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:5).

Let me make two observations before we go on. First, you may be saying, "But I thought the church was built on the Rock, Christ Jesus, not on Peter, the other apostles, or any other human stone."

That's true, of course, and nothing I have said above is meant to overlook or deny Jesus' ownership of His church. The church is, and always will be, the church of Jesus Christ. But it doesn't have

to be either/or. Both Paul and Peter later taught that Christ was the church's one and only "corner stone" (Ephesians 2:20; 1 Peter 2:6). But Paul still referred to the apostles as the church's foundation stones, and Peter said that the church was being built out of all the stones.

A second observation I want to make concerns Peter and his key role in building the church. Jesus did address Peter directly as a central figure in the church's establishment—and, as we're about to see, the Lord went even further by committing to Peter "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 16:19). So, even though Christ was speaking to all of the apostles in Matthew 16, and each one had a role to play, there is no denying that Peter was the most prominent.

And yet, unlike those who want to crown Peter as the first pope who handed infallible authority and succession to others, we need to remember that Jesus said to Peter, in effect, "You are a stone. But I am not building My church on individual stones. Many stones will come together to form My church." Peter's ministry was indispensable to the church, but he was not the cornerstone.

### ***Jesus' Promise of Victory***

The last phrase of Matthew 16:18 is worthy of separate treatment because it is loaded! Jesus said, "I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it." How do you know if the church that some leader or personality is building, or the one that you attend, is part of Jesus Christ's church? One way to know is to ask the simple question, "Who's winning?" If hell is winning, better be careful, because Jesus said His church would overcome the gates of hell.

Please notice that Jesus is on the offensive here, not the forces of Satan. Jesus is not trying to stop hell. Hell is trying to stop Jesus. A lot of ministry today has missed this point as people spend an inordinate amount of time trying to defeat the devil. But Jesus knew we could never defeat the devil on our own. That's why He came to live a perfect life, die on the cross for our sins, and be raised to life by God the Father three days later. That's why Jesus spoke of

the church as yet future in Matthew 16. He had not yet been to the cross, but when He arose our Savior presented His church with a defeated Satan.

It's not that Satan and his forces won't attack and try to overcome the church. We know that our real battle is against evil spiritual forces. But Jesus guaranteed that hell will not win this battle because it has already been fought and won at the cross. Sometimes we "do church" as if we are struggling for all we're worth to be victorious. But that's not the image of the church Jesus gave us.

Jesus chose His words carefully when He spoke of the "gates" of Hades, or hell. In the biblical world, the gate of a city was the place of authority. The city's elders would sit at the city gate to conduct the city's business and render decisions on behalf of the citizens. The gate was their city hall.

Jesus was speaking of satanic authority to act against the church. God has given Satan some room to operate for now, and we are going to learn the reason for that. But the word here is that Satan's authority will not prevail against the church—which also has real implications for society at large because the invisible and spiritual world controls the visible and physical.

Thus, when the church is doing its job, all of society benefits. This is what makes the church the most important entity in the world, whether the world realizes it or not. Actually, the world will not realize the restraining and sanctifying influence of the church until God raptures His church away and *all* of hell breaks loose on the earth.

### ***The Angelic Conflict***

Jesus' statement about the gates of hell, and the reality of the battle between heaven and hell throughout the ages, brings me to the subject of what I call the angelic conflict. We need to discuss this because the church is right in the middle of this conflict that began not on earth but in heaven some time in eternity past, and will not be finished until Jesus comes and imposes on Satan his final judgment.

Your understanding of the angelic conflict is crucial to having a proper view of the church and our place in God's plan.

I'm going to summarize a lot of biblical material that you can read on your own. Two key passages you'll want to review are Isaiah 14:12–14 and Ezekiel 28:11–19. These describe an angelic being so beautiful and so awe-inspiring that he stood next to the very throne of God and directed the myriads of other angels in worshipping God. His name was “Lucifer” (Isaiah 14:12 KJV) or “light-bearer.” He is called “star of the morning, son of the dawn!” (Isaiah 14:12).

We know that the angels are eternal spirit beings created by God to carry out His will and give Him the glory and the worship that He is due. The angels themselves are glorious creatures, and Lucifer was the most glorious of all. He was at the top of the angelic hierarchy. The description of him in Ezekiel 28 is nothing short of spectacular.

But at some point Lucifer fell in love with himself and decided he was tired of worshipping God. The Bible says of Lucifer, “Your heart was lifted up because of your beauty; you corrupted your wisdom by reason of your splendor” (Ezekiel 28:17). Lucifer wanted to be worshiped as God, and he convinced one-third of the angels (see Revelation 12:4) to follow him in open rebellion against God's throne. Lucifer's arrogance is summarized in the five times he declared, “I will,” culminating in the boast “I will make myself like the Most High” (Isaiah 14:13–14).

But God uncovered Lucifer's rebellion and put him and the angels who followed him on trial for treason. The rebels led by Lucifer were found guilty and sentenced to eternal punishment. (Jesus said in Matthew 25:41 that hell was first prepared for the devil and his angels.) God also changed Lucifer's name to Satan, the “adversary.” He became the enemy of God.

But instead of immediately throwing Satan and his demons into hell, the Bible says that the devil was “cut down to the earth” (Isaiah 14:12). For reasons that we will discuss, God banished the devil and his followers to a small speck of creation called earth. There the devil would enter into a conflict with another part of God's cre-

ation, mankind, and in the process God would be vindicated and glorified, and His power would be displayed, in an amazing way.

Satan’s “arrival” on earth as his temporary realm of operation is hinted at strongly in Genesis 1:1–2, where we read that after the creation of the heavens and the earth, “the earth was formless and void.” The Hebrew phrase translated “formless and void” means basically that the earth became a garbage dump.

You and I know that God doesn’t create garbage. That is not only contrary to His character, but it also contradicts a clear statement in Isaiah 45:18 that the Lord “did not create [the earth] a waste place, but formed it to be inhabited.” The phrase “waste place” here is the very same Hebrew phrase used in Genesis 1:2 to describe the earth as formless and void. God created the earth to be inhabited, but the earth of Genesis 1:2 was a waste place, a garbage dump not fit for habitation by mankind or any other creature.

How did the earth become a garbage dump? By becoming the domain of Satan after he was banished from heaven. God gave Satan just enough leash to reach the earth, and just enough power to exercise control over the kingdoms of this world. And any place where Satan rules becomes a wasteland.

Jesus said in Luke 10:18, “I was watching Satan fall from heaven like lightning.” That lightning hit the earth, so to speak, and this planet was turned into a formless mass. When God brought order out of the chaos and prepared the earth for the creation of Adam and Eve, the devil was there in the garden of Eden to tempt them, and the angelic conflict was on.

Why did God allow Satan to set up operations on earth and wreak his havoc? The best explanation is a theological one. That is, the Godhead conferred in Trinitarian session and decreed that Satan’s rebellion and judgment would be used as an opportunity to demonstrate God’s power, glory, justice, and righteousness—not only to Satan and his demons themselves, but to all of creation including mankind. After all, Satan’s rebellion had cast a cloud over the throne of God.

To appreciate the importance of this you have to understand

what a heinous, wicked act Satan's rebellion was. Here was the most beautiful and powerful of all God's creatures, not only rising up and shaking his fist in the face of the almighty, eternal God, but dragging one-third of God's holy angels with him—and doing so in God's perfect heaven! This was defiance, hatred, and ingratitude of monumental proportions.

Sin of this magnitude demanded more than judgment. The sinners needed to be made an example so others would see and understand and know better than to try to rebel against God.

It's like a parent whose child needs discipline. If your child disobeys you, you might sit him down for a while or send him to his room with a swat on the pants. But let's say you are a father whose son curses you and then slaps his mother in the face while the other children are watching. If that happened would you send that child to his room, or would you use the occasion to deal with him in such a way that you demonstrate beyond any doubt this had better not ever happen again?

That's the idea here. In fact, in order to demonstrate their divine power, glory, and wisdom the Godhead decided to use a creature that was far below the angels in stature to demonstrate what God can do with a lesser being who will love and obey and depend on Him—all those things that mighty Lucifer and his mighty angels refused to do.

Who is this lesser creature? Enter mankind. Hebrews 2:7 says we were created "for a little while lower than the angels." God made us this way to demonstrate to all of creation that when weak and powerless creatures like us yield ourselves to Him, neither Satan nor the angels can overpower us.

But in order to showcase His power and glory, God had to allow Satan access to us human beings so that He could prove once for all that "greater is He who is in [us] than he who is in the world" (1 John 4:4). When Satan gained access to the heart and mind of Eve and then Adam, the conflict began. But the good news is that God limited Satan's power to that of an influencer. That is, he can tempt



and try to deceive, but he cannot overpower people against their will, and he is ultimately a defeated foe because of Christ.

So whenever a person is saved, the power and glory of God are on display for heaven and earth to see. Whenever a believer resists Satan's temptations and lives in victory, God's righteousness and holiness are revealed. And by the way, this issue of the angelic conflict is so important to God that when He got ready to deal Satan the decisive defeat, He didn't hurl a lightning bolt from heaven or simply crush Satan with a word. Instead, He sent His Son in the very form of that lesser creature to whip Satan face to face in the wilderness and for good on the cross. John wrote, "The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8).

### THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM

We've covered a lot of ground in our study of Matthew 16, but we need to go back for one verse. Jesus finished His response to Peter with these words: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven" (v. 19a).

Notice right away that Jesus did not give Peter the keys of the church. Many people today misunderstand this verse because they think that the church and the kingdom are synonymous. But Jesus was careful to distinguish the two, using a completely different word for "kingdom." This word refers not to a called-out body of believers, which is the church, but to God's comprehensive rule over all of His creation. The church is limited, whereas the kingdom is comprehensive.

Keys stand for access, so what Jesus was giving His people is access to the resources of His all-encompassing kingdom. We can be grateful that Jesus did not limit our access to the resources of the church, because the kingdom is much bigger than the church. In fact, the church exists for the kingdom and not just for the church. I say that because our job is to help establish the rule of God in the hearts of people, and bring the values and priorities of God's kingdom to bear on every aspect of our culture.

God created the church to be His agency in this age representing His bigger plan, which is the kingdom. Satan knows this, which is why he works so hard to keep churches divided. He knows that if God's people ever really get together, his influence will be severely limited.

The kingdom keys of Matthew 16:19 are plural because the gates of hell are plural. This means that for every hellish gate Satan throws open against us, there is a corresponding kingdom key that opens a kingdom door behind which are the resources we need to meet that challenge.

So every time hell tries to stop Jesus from building His church, the church is supposed to pull out its kingdom key ring and find the key that corresponds to the gate hell just opened. This is a tremendous gift from Christ to His church.

The access and authority Jesus has given to the church is also underscored by the last phrase of Matthew 16:19, where Jesus said, "And whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven." This is another gift from Christ, speaking of the authority the church has to carry out His agenda.

But the problem today is that too many churches are looking for power instead of authority. Over the last thirty years or so, the church has become enamored of politics. Leading evangelical figures have gained access to the halls of power.

Now please don't misunderstand. There is nothing wrong with the church seeking to impact society, but the authority we need is not found in the halls of earthly power. We've learned how easily the enemy of the church can corrupt those in positions of great political—and today, corporate—power.

Satan isn't afraid of powermongers. But he cannot stand against the authority that Christ has given the church to wield in *His* name and *His* power. The church is God's only authorized representative in the world today, so let's get busy representing our Savior and Lord.