

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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Series:	The Heidelberg Catechism		Pastor/Teacher
Number:	38		Gary L.W. Johnson
Text:	Matthew 16:18		
Date:	June 21, 2015 a.m.		

One Holy Catholic Church

21. Lord's Day

Question 54. What believest thou concerning the "holy catholic church" of Christ?

Answer: That the Son of God (a) from the beginning to the end of the world, (b) gathers, defends, and preserves (c) to himself by his Spirit and word, (d) out of the whole human race, (e) a church chosen to everlasting life, (f) agreeing in true faith; (g) and that I am and forever shall remain, (h) a living member thereof. (i)

(a) Eph. 5:26 That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, John 10:11 I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep. Acts 20:28 Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. Eph. 4:11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; Eph. 4:12 For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Eph. 4:13 Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: (b) Ps. 71:17 O God, thou hast taught me from my youth: and hitherto have I declared thy wondrous works. Ps. 71:18 Now also when I am old and grayheaded, O God, forsake me not; until I have shewed thy strength unto this generation, and thy power to every one that is to come. Isa. 59:21 As for me, this is my covenant with them, saith the LORD; My spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed, saith the LORD, from henceforth and for ever. 1 Cor. 11:26 For as often as ye eat this bread, and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death till he come. (c) Matt. 16:18 And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. John 10:28 And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. John 10:29 My Father, which have them me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand. John 10:30 I and my Father are one. Ps. 129:1 (A Song of degrees) Many a time have they afflicted me from my youth, may Israel now say: Ps. 129:2 Many a time have they afflicted me from my youth: yet they have not prevailed against me. Ps. 129:3 The plowers plowed upon my back: they made long their furrows. Ps. 129:4 The LORD is righteous: he hath cut asunder the cords of the wicked. Ps. 129:5 Let them all be confounded and turned back that hate Zion. (d) Isa. 59:21 As for me, this is my covenant with them, saith the LORD; My spirit that is upon thee, and my words which I have put in thy mouth, shall not depart out of thy mouth, nor out of the mouth of thy seed, nor out of the mouth of thy seed's seed, saith the LORD, from henceforth and for ever. Rom. 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ: for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth; to the Jew first, and also to the Greek. Rom. 10:14 How then shall they call on him in whom they have not believed? and how shall they believe in him of whom they have not heard? and how shall

they hear without a preacher? Rom. 10:15 And how shall they preach, except they be sent? as it is written, How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace, and bring glad tidings of good things! Rom. 10:16 But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Esaias saith, Lord, who hath believed our report? Rom. 10:17 So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. Eph. 5:26 That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, (e) Gen. 26:4 And I will make thy seed to multiply as the stars of heaven, and will give unto thy seed all these countries; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; Rev. 5:9 And they sung a new song, saying, Thou art worthy to take the book, and to open the seals thereof: for thou wast slain, and hast redeemed us to God by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation; (f) Rom. 8:29 For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren. Rom. 8:30 Moreover whom he did predestinate, them he also called: and whom he called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified. Eph. 1:10 That in the dispensation of the fulness of times he might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven, and which are on earth: even in him: Eph. 1:11 In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will: Eph. 1:12 That we should be to the praise of his glory, who first trusted in Christ. Eph. 1:13 In whom ye also trusted, after that ye heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation: in whom also after they believed, ye were sealed with that holy Spirit of promise, (g) Acts 2:46 And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, Eph. 4:3 Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. Eph. 4:4 There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; Eph. 4:5 One Lord, one faith, one baptism, Eph. 4:6 One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all. (h) Ps. 23:6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever. 1 Cor. 1:8 Who shall confirm you unto the end, that ye may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 1 Cor. 1:9 God is faithful, by whom ye were called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord. John 10:28 And I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. 1 John 2:19 They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us. 1 Pet. 1:5 Who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. (i) 1 John 3:14 We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. 1 John 3:19 And hereby we know that we are of the truth and shall assure our hearts before him. 1 John 3:20 For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. 1 John 3:20 For if our heart condemn us, God is greater than our heart, and knoweth all things. 1 John 3:21 Beloved, if our heart condemn us not, then have we confidence toward God. 2 Cor. 13:5 Examine yourselves, whether ye be in the faith; prove your own selves. Know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be reprobates? Rom. 8:10 And if Christ be in you, the body is dead because of sin; but the Spirit is life because of righteousness.

It is important to note the language of the Apostles' Creed at this point. "I believe an holy catholic church." This means, of course, "I believe that there is such a church, which is both holy and catholic." We believe *in* God the Father almighty and We believe *in* Jesus Christ and We believe *in* the Holy Spirit; but note carefully the language - we do not believe *in* the church, still less in any particular manifestation or institute of the church in the world. When we say we believe in someone, what we are saying or affirming is that we put our trust or confidence in the object of our faith. To place faith in *anything* besides the triune God of Holy Scripture is idolatry. This phrase, in the words of Herman Hoeksema, means, "We believe that the church exists, that she is gathered out of the whole world, and that she is holy and catholic; agreeing in the true faith."¹ The church is an important aspect of the Christian faith. The church is *not* a human institution. She is God's creation. The Bible describes the church in various ways; for example, the church is referred to as the body of Christ, the bride of Christ, the household of God, the Temple of the Spirit, to mention only a few of the many figures used of the

Church in Scripture.² What defines the church is the gospel. The church is called *apostolic* not because we have apostolic tradition to help us identify our particular ecclesiastical emphasis, but because the church is founded on the gospel preached by the Apostles. The church is called holy not because she possesses holiness or virtue by her own strength but because she is in union with Christ. She is catholic³ in character not because that word denotes a particular branch of professing Christianity but because she exists in the whole world and has but one faith that links her with the saints down through the ages. She is, therefore, a universal church.

There is, regrettably, a tendency, not only in Evangelical circles but within the makeup of the American psyche, a large, pronounced tendency to have a strong distrust for institutions – and the church is an institution of long standing and as such falls under suspicion. As a result, people have a low view of the church. This goes hand-in-hand with an equally low opinion of creeds and confessions. In the American mentality, the individual is king. When adopted by Christians, this mind-set breeds narcissistic individualism that is foreign to the New Testament but very much at home with gnosticism in both its ancient and modern dress.⁴ We face a tremendous challenge today – it is the challenge of being the church.

We live in a world that is anything but stable. “The times they are a changin’,” sang Bob Dylan in 1964. All things are indeed subject not only to change but to corruption. Change produces a sense of uncertainty. Ask any sport’s fan about the effects of free-agency in their sport and on their favorite team. They seem to change yearly. Peter Berger, a noted sociologist, has observed how this sense of “homelessness” has affected modern social life, especially as it pertains to religion in America. “The general uncertainty, both cognitive and normative, brought about by the pluralization of everyday life and of biography in modern society, has brought religion into a serious crisis of plausibility. The age-old function of religion – to provide ultimate certainty amid the exigencies of the human condition – has been severely shaken. Because of the religious crisis in modern society, social ‘homelessness’ in the cosmos. This is very difficult to bear. The problem becomes most clearly apparent when one looks at the ancient function of religion which Weber called ‘theodicy.’ This means any explanation of human events that bestows meaning upon the experiences of suffering and evil. Through most of human history, religion provided such theodicies. In one way or another, religion made meaningful even the most painful experiences of the human condition, whether caused by natural or by social agents. Modern society has threatened the plausibility of religious theodicies, but it has not removed the experiences that call for them. Human beings continue to be stricken by sickness and death; they continue to experience social injustice and deprivation. The various secular creeds and ideologies that have arisen in the modern era have been singularly unsuccessful in providing satisfactory theodicies.”⁵ There is one thing in this world that will endure the onslaughts of time and the changes it brings. It is the church of the Lord Jesus Christ. He declared that He will build His church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. That is our text today. Implicit in it are four distinct things: (1) a building, (2) a builder, (3) a foundation, and (4) a triumph promise.

I. CHRIST’S BUILDING: “MY CHURCH”

This building is not made with hands out of wood, brick, stone or steel. It is a company of redeemed sinners who are now called saints. They are the elected of God, the flock of Christ – His bride and His body. This is the holy catholic church. How does a person become a member of this church? J.C. Ryle wrote: “The Church which comprises all who repent and believe the Gospel, is the Church to which we desire you to belong. Our work is not done, and our hearts are not satisfied, until you are made new creatures, and are members of the one true Church. Outside of this Church there can be no salvation.”⁶

II. CHRIST THE BUILDER: “I WILL BUILD”

The church is indeed the object of concern and care by all three persons of the Trinity. After all, we are told that God the Father elects and God the Holy Spirit sanctifies every member of Christ's body (Ephesians 1:3, 4; II Thessalonians 2:13). The work of building the church is, however, particularly ascribed to the Lord Jesus Christ. How does Christ go about building His church? Each and every one is given life by Him (John 5:21). He washes away their sin and guilt (Revelation 1:5). He is author and finisher of their faith (Hebrews 12:2). By Him they shall be presented faultless before the throne of the Father (Jude 24; Revelation 14:5). Only the Lord Jesus can build this church. He is the One who oversees this great work of church-building. Despite the failures and glaring faults of Christians down through the ages, Christ will never fail to build His church.

III. CHRIST THE FOUNDATION: “UPON THIS ROCK”

The Roman Catholic Church claims that Christ in Matthew 16:13-19 appointed Peter the first Pope and that Peter is the rock upon which the church is founded. The language of the text does not support that claim. Christ did not say, “You are Peter, and upon you will I build my church.” No, it was not upon the person of Peter but upon the good confession that Peter had just made (Matthew 16:16).⁷ Christ is the rock upon which the church is established (Ephesians 2:20-22; I Peter 2:4-8 and especially I Corinthians 3:11).

IV. CHRIST'S CHURCH PRESERVED: “THE GATES OF HADES SHALL NOT PREVAIL”

There is a very real threat of danger in this text. The “gates of HADES” (NIV) or “Hell” (KJV) has been interpreted as referring to the power of Satan and the hosts of darkness. This is possible since the word “gates” can refer to fortification (Psalm 127:5) and this implies a distinct enemy and warfare (Ephesians 6:10-18). However, this same expression is also found in Job 38:17; Psalm 107:18 and Isaiah 38:10 and *always* denotes the power of death and the grave.⁸ “The picture that it evokes is one of a fortress or prison with thick, impregnable gates, where death is king and the dead are held captive. Once someone has entered these gates, no human or earthly power can rescue him. The church of Christ, however, will not be ‘overcome’ by this power of death. Jesus spoke here as one who was stronger than death and who would cause His church to share in His victory over it. He holds the keys of death and HADES (Revelation 1:18). In gathering His church, He would rob death of its prey (see John 11:25.)”⁹

CONCLUSION: The history of the church has not always been glorious. In fact, on the surface, church history abounds with examples of corruption, schisms and decay. The church has stumbled badly at times. She has been oppressed and her testimony has on many occasions suffered. None of this negates the promise Christ declared in Matthew 16:18. The true church down through the ages has continued. Despite the stumbling and falling, she has endured because she is built upon the Rock of Christ. What is said of the church is true of every single believer. Christ has redeemed you and He will never lose you or let you slip away. He has so promised (John 6:39).

ENDNOTES

¹ H. Hoeksema, *The Triple Knowledge: An Exposition of Exposition of the Heidelberg Catechism II* (Reformed Free Pub. Assoc., 1971), p. 180.

² Paul Minear found no fewer than ninety-six figures and analogies that are applied to the church in the New Testament. Cf. Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church: Contours of Christian Theology* (IVP, 1995), p. 72.

³ The great Protestant Reformer John Calvin so treasured the word “Catholic” that he would not use it to describe his Roman Catholic opponents. Instead, he referred to them with terms like “Papisty” or simply “Rome.” Cf. Alexandre Ganoczy, *The Young Calvin* (Westminster Press, 1987), p. 9.

⁴ I would encourage you to read the two excellent books on the subject by Peter Jones, *The Gnostic Empire Strikes Back: An Old Heresy for the New Age* (P & R, 1992) and *Spirit Wars: Pagan Revival in Christian America* (Winepress, 1997).

⁵ P. Berger, *The Homeless Mind: Modernization and Consciousness* (Vintage, 1974), p. 184f.

⁶ J.C. Ryle, *Warnings to the Churches* (rpt. Banner of Truth, 1967), p. 12. Ryle is here referring to the famous statement of the church father Cyprian, Bishop of Carthage (ca. 200-258) EXTRA ECCLESIAM NULLA SALUS (outside the church there is no possibility of being saved). It is interesting to note that the Reformers, especially John Calvin, affirmed this. Like Cyprian (and Augustine) the Reformer uses the image of the church as the mother. “Because it is now our intention to discuss the visible church, let us learn even from the simple title ‘mother’ how useful, indeed how necessary, it is that we should know her. For there is no other way to enter into life unless this mother conceive us in her womb, give us birth, nourish us at her breast, and lastly, unless she keep us under her care and guidance until, putting off mortal flesh, we become like the angels... away from her bosom one cannot hope for any forgiveness of sins or any salvation... it is always disastrous to leave the Church” (*Institutes* IV, i.4).

⁷ It is well known that the Greek word (*petra*) translated “rock” here is different from the proper name Peter. The slight difference between them has no special importance, however. The most likely explanation for the change from *petros* (“Peter”) to *petra* is that *petra* was the norm word for “rock.” Because the feminine ending of this noun made it unsuitable as a man’s name, however, Simon was not called *petra* but *petros*. The word *petros* was not an exact synonym of *petra*; it literally meant “stone.” Jesus therefore has to switch to the word *petra* when He turned from Peter’s name to what it meant for the church. There is no good reason to think that Jesus switched from *petros* to *petra* to show that He was not speaking of the man Peter but of his confession as the foundation of the church. The words “on this rock [*petra*]” indeed refer to Peter. Because of the revelation that he had received and the confession that it motivated in him, Peter was appointed by Jesus to lay the foundation of the future church. Peter preaches the first sermon the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14-40; note especially Peter’s emphasis on Jesus as both Lord and Christ in verse 36). It is Peter who also is God’s instrument in bringing the Gentiles (Acts 10:1 – 11:18). Cf. H.N. Ridderbos, *The Bible Student’s Commentary: Matthew* (Zondervan, 1987), p. 303.

⁸ “That the powers of death will not prevail (Matt. 16:18) does not lie in Peter’s power or in that of the other apostles. Rather, their lack of power is pictured all the way through Gethsemane.” G.C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: The Church* (Eerdmans, 1976), p. 267.

⁹ Ridderbos, p. 304.5