

# CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CHURCH (PART I)

**H**arold Camping's folly is now universally known. He continues to be a laughing stock, but his errors are not restricted to date-setting for Christ's return.<sup>1</sup> W. Robert Godfrey, professor of church history and President of Westminster seminary in Escondido California, grew up in the CRC Church where Camping once taught a large Sunday School class. He knew Camping well and did a five part analysis Camping's teaching that is posted on the seminary's website. He wrote: "Camping's calculations and allegorical readings eventually led him to a truly heretical conclusion: that the age of the church was over and that all Christians were required to separate themselves from all churches. I had rather admired him over the years for not making himself a minister without proper education. I had never dreamed that he would instead abolish the pastoral office and the church. The end of the church age, according to Camping, paralleled the exile of Israel for its faithlessness in the Old Testament. Camping concluded that the organized church had become faithless and that individual Christians must leave the church and fellowship informally with other true believers. He seems to have come to this position somewhere around 2001, and supported it with various allegorical appeals to Scripture. Once again he rejected the clear teaching of the Bible for his own strange for his own strange approach. We must remember that God clearly warned Israel at the beginning of her history that she would be faithless and be exiled from the land of promise (Deuteronomy 28 – 30). By contrast the New Testament contains no such warning to the church as a whole. While Jesus warns specific congregations that they may be rejected as false churches (Revelation 2 – 3), he nowhere teaches that the church as a whole may fail. In fact, he teaches quite the opposite. Jesus said to Peter, 'And I say 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. And I give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven' (Matthew 16:18, 19). Notice that in this passage Jesus is not thinking of the church only in terms of faith, but also in terms of office in his reference to Peter and the keys of the kingdom. Reformed theology certainly does distinguish the visible church as the whole covenant community from the invisible church of the elect. But throughout the New Testament the believing church is linked to its offices. For example, we read that 'the church of the living God' is 'the pillar and ground of the truth' (I Timothy 3:15) in the same context as Paul's instructions about the elders and deacons of the church (I Timothy 3:1 – 4). Similarly we read Paul's commission to Timothy as an officebearer in the institutional church to preach and fulfill his ministry in the light of the false teaching that attacks Christian truth (I Timothy 4:2 – 5). Timothy is given this commission for the church in preparation for Christ's 'appearing,' that is, his second coming (I Timothy 4:1). This apostolic commission certainly implies that the work of the ministry remains crucial to the church until Christ comes again. The vital necessity of the institutional church as God's way of gathering and nurturing his people could be demonstrated in many ways. One final example must suffice here. Christ gave the great commission for the spreading of his truth and included in it the charge to baptize (Matthew 28:19, 20). This charge to baptize is related to Jesus' promise to be with his people to the end of the age. How can the charge to baptize be fulfilled without the institutional church?"<sup>2</sup> 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."<sup>3</sup>

### 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).<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> “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.”<sup>6</sup>)

**CONCLUSION:** Camping is strikingly similar to Joseph Smith who claimed that God personally told him that *all* the churches were an abomination and that Smith would establish the *really true* church. Camping teaches that the Holy Spirit no longer will save through the ministry of the visible church, no matter how faithful the preaching might be. Only those who leave the church now are obedient and only they can be saved by ministries like Family Radio. He leaves no room for other ministries, but his own. The visible, organized church no longer has any authority. There are no officers—minister, elder, or deacon. The church is reduced to a “fellowship” where it may be beneficial to gather for study, prayer, and song, but it is not required. As any cult, Camping will no doubt have to “adjust” his teachings of the Bible (easily done since he has declared that revelation is progressive). Already he has declared in a lecture aired on Family Radio, that the 4<sup>th</sup> Commandment is no longer required of believers. That solves the problem of what to do on Sunday. No doubt, more declarations will be forthcoming. A cult is not afraid to take an isolated position. Actually, this is their identity—the martyr syndrome. Anyone who differs is seen to engage in personal attacks or simply does not believe the teachings of the Bible. In the prefaces to both of the books referred to earlier, Camping presents himself as the martyr who simply must tell the truth, no matter what the outcome, since the church has refused (or has been unable) to address these teachings. It should be noted that the egregious error of calling believers to leave the visible church is not an isolated doctrinal error. For the most part, the teachings of Camping can best be described as “Gnostic.” In Gnosticism the physical was of little importance. It was always the spiritual that was seen as good. They denied that Christ had a real body. Are the followers of Camping gullible enough to believe that he has been able to see the deeper spiritual meaning of Scripture and it is this special knowledge that reveals the real way of salvation? His philosophical Gnostic view is further aggravated by his constant allegorical interpretations of the Bible, so that the average person would never gain a clear knowledge of what the Bible teaches unless they follow the teachings or writings of Camping. The follower becomes completely dependent on the leader’s insights. His exegesis of some passages is sometimes just the opposite of what God intended. One example is Matthew 5:32 in which an exception is made inclusive. In defending his own idea that all divorce is forbidden, he has taken the words, “saving for the cause of fornication” and insists that the real meaning is, “including for the cause of fornication.” Another example is I Timothy 3:15 which says that the church is the “pillar and ground of the truth.” Because of his bias against church authority, he has declared that the church has always misinterpreted this verse. He alleges that it is God alone who is the “pillar and ground of the truth.” This is a serious, mistaken exegesis. In this veiled attempt to elevate God, he has reduced Him. God is the Truth, not just the pillar and ground of it. God sent His Holy Spirit to dwell with, guide, and comfort His Church. Jesus said that the ‘gates of hell’ would not prevail against the church. Camping has reinterpreted and spiritualized this. He says that it does not mean the visible church, but the spiritual, eternal church. We would not disagree that this reference is to true believers in Christ. But, these believers are also part of a corporate body that worships together. The church is not just an organism, but an organization as well. Christ has ordained that it should be governed by officers, and according to certain structure. Camping denies that the local, corporate church is the Bride of Christ. Now, certainly, there are hypocrites in the local church, but Christ will separate those who merely cry “Lord, Lord...,” from those who truly love and serve Christ the Lord. Camping has taken it upon himself to perform this judgment now—those who depart from the church now are the true spiritual church—the true Body of Christ. Is Camping a perfectionist? The fact that Camping has declared that the offices of the church are no longer present, one can only assume some sort of perfectionism among his followers that will not require the oversight and discipline of the church as in the past. There would be no structure left to perform it. The damage to the fellowship of the church is incredible. It is akin to saying to one part of the body, “I don’t need you.” (Cf. I Corinthians 12:14 - 27) Christians do need one another, for their counsel and help. They also need to be there to help other believers in need. By isolating his followers from those who might teach them otherwise they are insulated from anyone who might call them to repent of their actions. In fact, Camping assumes that those who leave the church will be disciplined, but counsels his followers not to worry. The elders of the church no longer have authority. This is one area that appeals to many of Camping’s followers. They are untouchable. To refute the teachings of Camping is like trying to unscramble an egg. Nearly every verse is distorted or taken out of context to suit his pre-conceived conclusions. Scripture is alleged to be an allegory filled with “hidden truths” that require someone of Camping’s unique talents and insight to uncover. Very little Scripture means what it says, but according to Camping, there is a “deeper spiritual meaning” to every

passage. If you don't agree with his conclusions, you are just dismissed as one who does not agree with the Bible. So, he maintains his position of "the Bible alone" while pouring his own agenda and convoluted exegesis into it. This uniqueness appeals to many who view this as real depth of scholarship that is just not found in churches today. In many ways we see in Camping the sin of Korah, who disregarded the God-given authority of Moses and declared that all the people are holy. They are all given authority. The distinction between the general office of a believer and the special offices in the church has been erased. Woe to the person who would dare to assume the office of a prophet by himself (see Numbers 16:28 - 35). Mr. Camping has not been called by anyone or ordained to the office of world evangelist. He has not undergone an examination as to his orthodoxy, nor does he submit to any ecclesiastical authority for what he teaches.<sup>7</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> As might be expected the feeble-sighted folks at *Christianity Today* fail to see the awful damage Camping has done. Mark Galli, one of the senior editors, waxed eloquent about how Camping reminded him of one of his goofy aunts. "We're tempted at such moments to distance ourselves from them. To push them away. To lock them out. We're likely to mock them so that others will know we're not like them. In short, we disown them. We say, *They're not one of us*. The problem is that they very much are one of us. They are naming the name of Jesus, proclaiming loyalty to him first and foremost. Often they are making substantial sacrifices of fame or fortune to do what they feel God is calling them to do. And they don't care, because they believe they are doing it for Jesus." [http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article\\_print.html?id=92560](http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/article_print.html?id=92560) The Apostle Paul had an entirely different assessment of false teachers like Camping. He called them *savage wolves* (Acts 20:28 - 30) and sternly declared that they were to be avoided (Romans 16:17).

<sup>2</sup> [www.westminsterseminary.com](http://www.westminsterseminary.com)

<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> 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 had 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 in the Gentiles (Acts 10:1 - 11:18). cf. H.N. Ridderbos, *The Bible Student's Commentary: Matthew* (Zondervan, 1987), p. 303.

<sup>5</sup> "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.

<sup>6</sup> Ridderbos, p. 304.5.

<sup>7</sup> See: REPORT OF THE SPECIAL COMMITTEE TO STUDY HAROLD CAMPING'S VIEW OF THE CHURCH; <http://www.rcus.org/index.php/doctrine/position-papers/263-harold-camping>