

## **“Let’s Talk Church”**

### **Matthew 16:13-20**

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Baptists have never been very comfortable with this passage of scripture. We are not sure what to do with Jesus’ response to Peter’s confession of faith. “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven” Matthew 16:18-19.

I have to admit I wish Jesus had been a little clearer about what he meant by “rock” and what kind of authority and responsibility he was granting Peter. Was he saying that he was going to build his church upon Peter or upon people that had the faith and vision of Peter? Catholics lean toward the former interpretation and Protestants the latter. The debate has only been raging for a few hundred years. We’ll not settle it today, either.

That’s ok. My purpose this morning is not to solve this theological dilemma but to make another point. When I read this paragraph, what stands out to me is this. **Jesus was serious about establishing and maintaining the church.** Laying the groundwork for the church was a part of his mission and purpose, a big part. He knew the survival of the work he began depended upon the success of the church. All he accomplished in his three-year ministry would be in vain without the church. So, he took the church seriously and planted the seed for its construction in Peter’s heart.

**I, too, have taken the church seriously.** My entire adult life has revolved around the church. I began pastoring a church at the age of nineteen while in college and have been the pastor of a church ever since. I have spent thirty-three years writing and preaching sermons, teaching Sunday School, conducting funerals and weddings, visiting hospitals and nursing homes, counseling people, sharing my faith, raising money, going to meetings and eating a lot of banana pudding and chocolate pies. I have loved it more than words could ever express and feel most fortunate. If I had it to do over, I would. As a matter of fact, I would ask God for the assignment. I feel a little like Nathan Hale, “I regret that I have but one life to give to the church.” I believe he said “country” but then maybe he didn’t like banana pudding as much as I do.

**I’ll tell you something else that I take seriously, pastoring this church.** The health of this church is very important to me. I feel a heavy sense of responsibility to God to lead it where He wants it to go and become what He wants it to be. I assure you that He and I talk about this a lot and today I would like to share with you where I think He is leading you and me.

Four and one-half years ago, I was engaged in dialogue with the pulpit committee about becoming you next pastor. One series of questions I distinctly recall was, “If you become our pastor, what would you like to do? What agenda would you have and what changes would you make?” My reply was brief, “I don’t know.”

I told the committee members that I knew very little about Smoke Rise and it would be presumptuous of me to say what I would do until I evaluated what needed to be

done. I would need time to study the church to discover the needs. It did not take long for me to identify some of those needs and begin addressing them. Let me briefly outline them.

**I felt the most immediate need the church had was to hire a minister of education and outreach.** Teaching is my passion and education is the foundation of a healthy church. I am of the old school, “As the education program goes, so goes the church.”

As a result, we immediately formed a search committee and found Kathy Dobbins. This is one of the best decisions we ever made.

**Secondly, I felt we needed to clearly define our vision and mission statements along with our core values.** We needed to define who we are and who we are not, especially in our religious climate. We needed a compass that would give us clear direction when we encounter crossroads. I am proud of the “Report of the Core Values Committee” that resulted from a year of hard work and pleased with the vast number of members that drafted it. This report provides both identity and vision for our church.

**I felt we needed a stronger emphasis on missions, doing missions as well as learning about it.** No doubt you have heard the slogan, “Every member a minister.” That is our dream. We want every Smoke Rise member to be involved in local or global mission projects, using their gifts and talents to make the world better.

I am pleased to announce that this dream is becoming reality. Tim Adcox recently showed me a chart that revealed that missions involvement by our members has increased over two hundred percent in the last four years. How grateful I am for this growing participation by our congregation. Smoke Rise has made a difference in the lives of people in Honduras, Uganda, Tijuana, Utah, Chicago, Alaska as well as our own beloved Atlanta. Missions is the heartbeat of the Gospel. May it be ours, too.

**I felt that we needed to evaluate our style of worship.** No church I know has finer worship leaders than Smoke Rise. Our staff is exceptional. However, I did not feel we were releasing the creative ability of our staff and lay leaders as we should and that our style of worship was too narrow. Smoke Rise prides itself on being inclusive, which is one thing I love about our church. And yet, in my opinion, our worship style was too narrowly focused and prohibiting some people from worshipping. I felt we could move to a blended style of worship and meet the needs of more of our members and guests. I had the confidence that we could do so and maintain the quality and integrity of our worship and we have. My hat is off to Jerry and all that have helped him. We owe them a great debt of gratitude.

**I also felt that we needed to resolve the Southern Baptist/Cooperative Baptist controversy while at the same time protecting our valued convention employees.** It seemed to me that the best way to do this was to let members choose their mission carrier. That’s the Baptist way. Allow each person to follow the dictates of his or her conscience under the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Both entities are doing their part to meet human needs here and around the world. Supporting either mission organization will enable our church to fulfill the Great Commission. I even felt that giving our people a choice would increase the overall mission giving and it has. In 1997, our members gave \$270,919 to mission causes. By 2001, that figure had grown to \$486,840. Thank you, Smoke Rise members for your generosity.

**Finally, I felt that our church needed to engage in another capital campaign.** We needed to raise money above our annual budget to make improvements to our facilities, reduce our debt and support mission projects that need immediate attention.

I have always believed that members of a church needed to be good stewards of the facilities they have built or inherited. Improvements, which are inevitable, need to be planned and implemented in an orderly fashion. We need to leave the facilities better than we found them. To do less is to be careless and selfish. It is also inexcusable. This is why I think we need a capital campaign that will enable us to be wise and faithful stewards.

You see, I think those who sacrificed to build our facilities expected us to make sacrifices to maintain them and keep them functional and attractive so people will come to hear the Gospel and advance the Kingdom through this wonderful church. The failure to do so would disappoint them terribly. Let's not do that, but let us make them proud by the way we take care of what they have entrusted to us. And let us use this campaign to begin that process.

You will hear a lot more about this campaign, **“Faith, Family, Future: Expanding the Legacy of the Smoke Rise Spirit”** in the weeks to come. I wanted to introduce it to you this morning as a part of an overall perspective of our church. I encourage you to learn more about it and prayerfully consider your part in helping us make it succeed.

I have one more question for you before I close. I've told you that I think Jesus considered church important and that I do, too. How about you? **Do you consider church an important part of your life?** I sure hope so, but more importantly, I think Jesus hopes so. He's counting on you to be one of the “rocks” upon which he can build his church.