

HOW TO BUILD A CHURCH

Anniversary Sunday
Matthew 16:18

September 21, 2008
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“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church...”

Fifty years! And it has been MORE than a half-century since a small group of approximately a dozen families began meeting together to consider starting a new church. Their intent was simply to meet the needs of this rapidly growing University Town which then had enrolled about 6,000 students but today boasts over 25,000. Fifty years! I never thought I would live to see this day.

I have been greatly blessed by being called as the first minister of this congregation, and I cannot begin to tell you how wonderful it is today to see so many of you who have returned and have belonged to this church at some earlier stage of your lives. It is also with great joy that we have with us so many former ministers and staff members who have helped make Binkley what it is today.

From the outset of its founding, I realized that Binkley Church offered a unique opportunity: to start a new Baptist Church in a University town. Those few charter members made many right decisions from the very beginning. They would exercise Baptist freedom and local autonomy. They would move out in new directions for Baptists. They would be ecumenical. They would create Christian Education programs designed to close the gap between the seminary trained pastor and those in the congregation. They would be unafraid of controversy in seeking social justice. And so, with only a parsonage, a new piano, and fifty hymnbooks, they constituted this church on September 21st, precisely fifty years ago to this very day.

I. We had no building, but UNC permitted us to use Gerrard Hall as a place for worship. That small campus building has recently been restored to its original design when it was used as a chapel for University students. A marble marker over the door quotes the prophet Micah who asked, “What doth the Lord require of thee, but to do justice and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God?” But inside, for some unknown reason, the focal point of attention up front was a large painting of St. George slaying the dragon. The first thing we had to do every Sunday morning was to cover it up with a large cross attached to a framed bedspread.

Not having a physical place to call our own was a blessing in disguise. We learned an important lesson about building a church. We learned that a church is not bricks and mortar, but flesh and blood and spirit. We learned that a church is humanity and divinity incarnate. We learned that the church is people. It is “The Company of the Committed,” the title of a book by Elton Trueblood which we discussed on my initial visit with the founding group, meeting in Glenwood School.

Theologians sometimes speak of the gathered church and the scattered church. Because we had no building of our own, we learned another good lesson about building a church. With no place of our own to identify our presence in the community, we realized that the church is Christian people wherever they are, scattered in their diverse vocations. Actually we emphasized that. We said to Fred Ellis, if you will run for a seat on the school board, you will be our church there, and once elected, Fred cast the critical decisive vote that led to the integration of the school system. Even liberal Chapel Hill had failed to abide by the Supreme Court’s mandate to integrate “with all deliberate speed.” And we said to Dean Smith, your church assignment is to integrate the ACC by recruiting the best black basketball player you can find. You will be our church on the basketball court. And Dean recruited Charlie Scott. And you know the rest of the story.

That understanding of the scattered church led us to the phrase we are still use here at Binkley: “Every member a minister.” We realized that our faithfulness as Christians meant taking seriously the concept of Christian vocation, that not only the clergy should have a sense of God’s calling, but each of you should have a sense of God’s calling in the place of your employment, choosing work essential to the well-being of the world. Unfortunately, that sense of vocational calling seems to have faded in our increasingly secular culture, but it is basic to building a church. For the scattered church is the leaven in the lump. It is the salt that gives savor to society. The gathered church is the church on Sunday while the scattered church is the light of the world every weekday. My friends, wherever you are, you are the church.

II. Of course we knew that our congregation would eventually need a building, and from day one we looked forward to the time when we would become visible in this location. We were indebted to the Yates Baptist Association in Durham for this property, which was purchased for merely seven thousand dollars! We needed a building for the worshipping gathered church, and this building has grown as the congregation has grown. Today some of you are seeing the recently added new space. Though we know the Church is people and not place, we proudly call this functional and beautiful building our church home.

But do we know better? I hope so! Even though we think of this facility as OUR church, we surely understand that theologically it is the Church of Our Lord, Jesus Christ. It is His church, not ours. You recall from the Scripture Lesson that Jesus said, “I will build MY church.

Remembering this distinction is not easy, especially in Protestantism where the minister has such inordinate influence over what happens in the life of the congregation. So much so, that should that minister have a long tenure –as was once the case here – there will be a strong temptation to identify the church with his leadership. My friends, it is hard for me to realize that I retired 20 years ago. Yet, to this day, I am troubled by the fact that some people in Chapel Hill still refer to Binkley as “Bob Seymour’s church.”

Whenever we succumb to the mentality of thinking that the church belongs to you or to me, we become vulnerable to betraying Our Lord. We Baptists boast of democratic congregational rule, but we sometimes forget that theological truth is not established by a show of hands of the majority. The church is never ours to run as we please. We are called to be faithful rather to be in charge. We may appeal to our conscience in the decisions we make, but even that can be dangerous if our conscience is not captive to the mind of Christ.

Early in our life together as a faith fellowship, I felt awkward about voting people into our membership, as if it were our prerogative to judge who belonged to Christ and who did not, as if it were our church. This awkwardness was accentuated at that particular time because some congregations across the South deliberately excluded Christians of color and made the church more like a private club than a community of faith. And so, we still never ask for a show of hands when we receive new members. We simply welcome them as persons whom Our Lord has prompted to come forward, asking to join. We never require a vote or request a show of approving hands.

III. Perhaps the most powerful influence in the building of a church is the culture which surrounds it. Culture tends to shape us individually as we are nurtured and influenced by the environment of the scattered church. Culture may also be symbolically reflected in the architectural style chosen for the gathered church. For example, when you see a cathedral, you associate it immediately with the culture of the Middle Ages. And when you see the simplicity of a Colonial building with its traditional steeple, you are reminded of the more austere culture of early America. What about Binkley Church? This facility has the look of contemporary culture and just may mirror the values and priorities accepted in today’s culture in more ways than you or I realize.

Some of you are familiar with the theological classic written by one of my Yale Divinity School professors, Richard Niebuhr, the brother of the more famous Reinhold Niebuhr. The book is titled "Christ and Culture." In it he describes five ways the church relates to culture, everything from total withdrawal and rejection of surrounding culture -- such as the monastic movement in the Middle Ages--- to succumbing completely to culture, baptizing its values so similarly that the line between culture and church is blurred or virtually non-existent. And so, I would contend this morning that a critical question for the future of this congregation for the next fifty years and beyond should be, is our culture changing the church or is the church changing culture? There is an inescapable interaction.

It is my personal impression that secularism is rapidly on the rise in America, and although some of the values in secular culture may coincide with values we also cherish as Christians, secularism is eroding the gospel we preach. For example, the largest church in America fills a stadium in Texas with 17,000 people every Sunday where its pastor consistently preaches the prosperity gospel, that God wants you to succeed and be rich. God's love for you means that you should expect the good life with an abundance of whatever your heart desires. And the good life for most Americans means acquiring an abundance of things. The message sounds very much in tune with a culture that values each of us not because we have an immortal soul but because we are heavy consumers that keeps the economy humming by how much we buy. The admonition to "live more simply than others may simply live" has no place there.

I recall a classic comment when I was in seminary that revealed this same kind of phenomena of the pulpit echoing culture. It was a time when the sermons of many ministers sounded more like pop psychology than the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The high priest of that genre of homiletics was Norman Vincent Peale. And so, when someone raised the question about the difference between the Apostle Paul and the famous Fifth Avenue preacher, the answer on campus was, "Paul is appealing but Peale is appalling!"

IV. I ask you now to consider what contemporary culture is doing to two of Christendom's major concerns: education and healthcare. Jesus came teaching and healing. Look first to what is happening in education. Many of America's finest colleges and universities were founded by the church but many have almost totally distanced themselves from religious education. You can get a PhD degree without ever asking an existential question or contemplating the meaning of life. In his new book about "Academic Knowledge and the Knowledge of God," Duke Divinity School Professor Stanley Hauerwas contends that when Christian students embrace the modern university that has a Christian origin they partake of an institution that offers a thin Christian veneer over a secular core. He concludes that it has become the tool of the State, teaching that debate is to be valued over doctrine, that compromise is more important than conviction, and that the only truths that matter are utilitarian ones. It is a disturbing indictment.

In elementary and secondary education, knowledge of religion is almost non-existent. Mind you, I believe in separation of Church and State, but I stand with Binkley's own Warren Nord who makes a convincing case for studies of religion in education at every level. Why? Because religion's place in Western culture simply cannot be ignored if you are to become an educated person. Did you know that even when atheistic Communism reigned in Soviet Russia students in history, art and music had to be exposed to some knowledge of Biblical literature in order to make sense of their academic material?

I recall from my growing up days that Sunday was a very special and very different day, but now I have the feeling that for many people it's significance even as a day of rest has eroded. I'm not asking for Blue Laws, but in our increasingly secular society, I am wondering how much longer Sunday School can survive when it competes with Sunday morning soccer.

I have a vivid personal remembrance of the time when television network coverage of UNC basketball wanted to schedule games beginning at noon on Sunday. I had a vested interest because my wife was the organist. With her obsession with basketball, I feared that whatever congregation was left for worship would have to sing the last hymn a cappella! I breathed a sigh of relief when our University ruled that no athletic event should be scheduled on Sunday before one o'clock.

V. A second major concern of Christendom from its earliest years has been caring for the sick. Jesus came healing. Christianity from its beginnings constituted a healthcare system. Caring for the sick and suffering was always a priority. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to say that modern medicine has flourished in Western civilization because of the commitment of the Church to a ministry of healing. But need I tell you that healthcare which was once seen as a ministry of the church, leading to the building of hospitals all across this continent, has now become a major industry? It has become a business, and I am convinced that the market economy will never serve all the sick. Our secular obsession for financial profit has brought us a broken medical system that leaves nearly fifty million Americans without access to adequate medical attention. I am a member of the board of UNC Healthcare where I am dismayed by how the market economy rules, even in the vocabulary. The latest word change proposed at UNC Hospitals is that we should no longer call people who are sick patients but should call them customers instead!

The market mentality is pervasive in our culture. I predict that soon preachers may be referred to as service providers and members of churches may also be called customers. Lest you laugh, may I remind you that for a long time we have heard people new to this community say "We are "shopping around for a church?" And dare I remind you that we have already capitulated to the market place vocabulary, for we have on our staff a "business manager." I think I would feel more comfortable if we changed this position to that of a Stewardship Secretary.

Furthermore, the standard measurements of success for a church in our secular culture are reflected by our gauging how well we are doing by citing numerical statistics. How do we judge when a church is successful? By the number of its members, by the size of its budget, and by whether or not it has a capital funds drive underway for further expansions of its building. Surely the Christ to whom the church belongs judges his church by the state of its spiritual health and by the depth of our faith, the quality of our love, and the strength of our commitment to social justice.

VI. Let me mention now several frontiers that should shape our future as we look toward the next fifty years. Remember that Jesus said, "I WILL build my church" –future tense. I take that quite seriously. Building the church is a continuing process. As we move through this new century our ministry must move in new directions. It appears that the big word defining our future is the word "globalization." As Christians, we should feel very much at home with this concept, for we have always preached a Gospel that proclaims "God so loved the world"—the whole world. Yet, sadly, in recent years our country has not played very well with others, and many nations compare the America we love to the school yard bully. Our patriotism often comes across as arrogance. Surely, as Christians, we should know that our first loyalty is not to the American flag but to all of God's children everywhere. We belong to a body that transcends the nations. The time has come when we should act upon our belief that we are indeed one family, including everyone beyond our national borders.

Even non-Christians are beginning to understand that our very survival as a nation may depend upon this. The threat of global warming mandates that care for God's creation and earth ministry get urgent attention. The carbon we spew into the atmosphere has universal consequence, and while we were shocked by the fear of bad air at the Olympics, we should confess that we are at the top of the list of those who are spewing most of the carbon into the atmosphere. We refused to sign the Kyoto Treaty for scaling back our own pollution, and

begrudgingly, at the more recent world environmental conference in Bali, affixed our country's name to the document at a final late night session, but with some notable reservations. My friends, we cannot go it alone anymore. Isolationism is no option. Contemporary missionaries may need to be environmentalists who are concerned not only about the salvation of people but also about saving Mother earth.

This brings me at last to what some will judge to be a controversial belief. In a shrinking planet where we are frequently face to face with people who are committed to other world religions, I believe it is time to take Ecumenism to a new level. Consider this question: Could this be what Jesus meant when he said, "Other sheep I have that are not of this fold?" We have built bridges of understanding between the church and the synagogue. Building bridges between the church and the mosque is already way past due. Jews, Christians and Muslims are all descendants of Abraham. We need to have a family reunion and embrace our relatives whose beliefs may not coincide with our own.

VII. Let me now return you to our text. Jesus said, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." Roman Catholics have concluded that Jesus literally meant Peter, the man, upon whom apostolic succession has followed as the authoritarian voice of the Christendom. Protestants, however, believe that the church is built on all people LIKE Peter, men and women, children and youth, who profess their faith in Jesus as the Christ.

Peter was far from perfect. He was impetuous. His faith wavered when Our Lord asked him to walk on water. He even betrayed Jesus that night in the courtyard when Our Lord was on trial before his crucifixion. Significantly, in the very next paragraph of this same Matthew text where Jesus said to Peter that he would be the rock on which the church would be built, Jesus was so offended by something else Peter said, that he reprimanded him and shouted, "Get thee behind me, Satan!"

This convinces me that Christ builds his church upon imperfect people like you and me. It tells me that he never gives up on us. It tells me that he repeatedly comes to our rescue with recurring forgiveness and assurances of our acceptance. My friends, fifty historic years with Binkley Church is convincing evidence of that conviction. Our savior has steered us through celebrations and controversies inspiration and disappointments, achievements and failures. There is an old Gospel song that says of God, "He would not have brought us this far just to leave us." Our past gives us cause to rejoice today in the faith that Christ will continue to lead us into all the foreseeable future, that he will go before us with wisdom and guidance, that he will offer us sufficient strength to overcome our weaknesses. For He is still building his church upon people like Peter. Indeed, upon people like you and me with all our frailty and failings, with all our faults and fears, until the end of time.

Amen