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1993: On This Rock I Will Build My Church

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On This Rock

*I Will Build
My Church*

MATTHEW 16:18

Presented by Dr. Royce Money, president of Abilene Christian University,
at the ACU Bible Lectureship, February 21, 1993.

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Matthew 16:13-18

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?"

¹⁴ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets."

¹⁵ "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?"

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the son of the living God."

¹⁷ Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my father in Heaven.

¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."

Often I have read this passage, and every time I find myself wondering what Jesus had in mind when he said "church." When Jesus promised to build his church on the confession of his Lordship, I wonder what he envisioned for his people when he referred to "my church."

The church of which Jesus spoke began shortly after He uttered these words – "my church."

I have spent all my life in relentless pursuit of restoring the church of the New Testament. I look at where we are in our Restoration Heritage as churches of Christ. I look at Jesus' prayer for unity of His followers in John 17, and I wonder what Jesus think .

I come to you tonight with a heavy burden on my heart for the church. As we seek to be the church that belongs to Jesus Christ, I see hindrances along our way that impede our progress toward our goal of being the church that belongs to Christ. I want to be honest with you tonight and discuss some issues and problems and challenges we face in our fellowship that are not easy or pleasant to discuss. But we must.

There are several things I believe our fellowship must do to avoid fracturing, dividing and losing the vision of what Christ intended for His people.

We must pay attention to them if we are to prosper and grow and truly be Christ's church.

Things we must do in the church to promote growth and avoid disaster

1. We must stop being influenced by radical voices on either side.

I often refer to our fellowship as being represented by a 1-to-10 scale. The "1" represents the ultra-conservative, legalistic mindset. The "10" represents the progressive, most liberal mindset.

Interestingly, I have found that these two extremes are more alike than they are different. Both extremes have given up on those of us in the mainstream.

Sadly, I also have concluded that each radical element is so fixed on its own agenda, which usually includes rejection of everyone else, that they are very difficult to reason with and work with.

The fact that ACU is condemned by both radical elements is probably a compliment to the university and a confirmation that it stands where it has always stood – squarely in the broad middle of our movement to restore New Testament Christianity.

Yet these vocal minorities can infect the broad mainstream in a disproportionate way if we allow them. My caution to you is that we not allow this to happen.

2. We must realize that unity does not mean uniformity of belief.

It never has; it never will. Unity must be forged from a diversity of belief that is beyond the essential core beliefs of Christianity. Obviously, I believe in the existence of essential beliefs that are taught by the New Testament upon which we all must stand. The most central and obvious is the one Peter confessed in our text – Jesus is the Son of God.

I believe in the essential nature of believer's baptism to wash away sins and to obtain the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Our worship should consist of a cappella singing, praying, weekly observance of communion, and worship led by Christian men in an orderly way.

I spell out these to you because I recently read in a brotherhood publication that the ACU president apparently saw all of these beliefs as optional. I do not.

The seven-fold unity that the Spirit gives, according to Ephesians 4, is non-negotiable. Interestingly, Paul says there that we are to "make every effort" to **maintain** this unity that the Spirit creates "in the bond of peace."

In reading some of our critical brotherhood papers, "peace" is not the first word that springs into my mind.

3. We must determine the essentials of faith apart from traditions, customs, comfort and personal preference.

Here's a lesson of history: the longer we exist as a distinctive Christian movement to restore New Testament Christianity, the more difficult this goal will become.

There is a vast difference between tradition and traditionalism. **Traditions** are good and necessary. **Traditionalism** lifts tradition to the level of doctrine and draws lines of fellowship. May the Lord help us to know the difference.

4. We must realize in dealing with those who differ with us, both within our fellowship and beyond, that tolerance and a certain level of fellowship is not the same as a total endorsement of another's views.

Some of us have adopted an "either-or" view. People are either totally acceptable to us in their doctrinal beliefs or they are totally wrong. Some have decided that if we cannot endorse virtually every doctrinal stance of another, then we must have nothing to do with them. The whole is judged by one part.

If that were the case in New Testament times, Paul would have had a hard time in Corinth, Ephesus, Jerusalem, and a lot of other places.

To tolerate simply means to "put up with" someone, even when you do not agree with what they are doing. The Bible teaches that we should not tolerate those who deny Christ or who live lives of unrepentant immorality.

But that leaves us a lot of room for mutual consideration of our differences and a charitable spirit toward those with whom we disagree.

5. We must learn how to handle diversity in a charitable way. Namely, worship styles.

There are many kinds of diversity besides doctrinal: geographic, social or cultural, economic, age, education and ethnic. It is interesting that within our brotherhood, black churches traditionally have had a different worship style from predominantly white churches, yet no one has complained or withdrawn fellowship. And of course, urban churches differ from rural churches.

Diversity is already there in all our churches. To deny it is to prolong the problem. Every diversity I just mentioned existed in the 1st century A.D. when the church began and flourished. We are not without biblical guidance on these matters. Romans 14 and 15 deal with it extensively.

Diversity **can** be viewed as a strength, not a weakness. Within set biblical parameters, as I have already outlined, diversity can and should be celebrated and not condemned.

6. We must mark those who cause division among us.

Mark those whose agenda is control instead of building up the body of Christ. Mark those who thrive on controversy. Mark those who twist the truth, assign false motives, who gossip and slander and are driven by ego and the need to control and dominate – all under the guise of “sound doctrine” on the right or “staying on the cutting edge of change” on the left.

The spirit of Christ should not be replaced by the spirit of Diotrephes:

III John 9-10

⁹I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will have nothing to do with us. ¹⁰So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us. Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.

If printing presses and periodicals had been around in the 1st century, I imagine Diotrephes would have had one. These kinds of people are not going to save the church. The church needs to be saved from **them**.

7. We must decide what is the driving force behind the restoration of New Testament Christianity.

Is the process of restoring New Testament Christianity a relentless and continual search for God's truth? A **process**? Or is it **accomplished fact**?

Have we restored **everything** in the New Testament church, or do we need to continue to search God's Word for a better glimpse of the truth?

If it is a continual search for truth – a process that never ends throughout our lives and from one generation to another – then we will study and discuss and listen and learn from each other and from any source that can give us a clearer vision of God's truth.

If the driving force behind the restoration of New Testament Christianity is that it is accomplished fact, then we will be dedicated to preserving, protecting and defending what we have already learned.

One answer is a process; the other is an accomplishment of the past. If you think it is a process, you have nothing to fear from an honest search for truth, even when you have to adjust a former belief.

Remember, that's how the Restoration Movement started in the first place.

If you believe that the restoration of New Testament Christianity is an accomplished fact – that we have the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, the **last** thing

you want is people going around trying to think and examine and search and question.

It is ironic to me that this view would have prohibited the very climate out of which the 19th century Restoration Movement grew.

I ask each of you, what do **you** think the process of restoring New Testament Christianity is all about?

I think it is a process, whereby we add and continually adjust to what we already know. Based on a serious study of God's Word, we have restored in faith and practice many of the important concepts of the Gospel. But it is not complete.

One thing for sure that we have **not** yet restored is the early Christians' zeal for evangelizing a lost world. If the truth of the Scriptures demands it, we must continue to study and grow and change.

8. We must make some decisions about the role of the Christian colleges.

Dr. Bailey McBride, of Oklahoma Christian University of Science and Arts, researched various church members' views on the function or role of our Christian colleges in our brotherhood. Here's a sample of the variety of viewpoints he found:

- They are a step-brother of the church that we must tolerate;
- A child of the church that needs to be watched and disciplined;
- Christian colleges are bright children, but they have become “too big for their britches” and have too much influence in the church and operate from a different agenda than the church;
- Christian colleges are like a nurturing mother;
- They are a great boarding school for unmanageable children;
- The primary work of Christian colleges is to train preachers and teachers for our churches;
- Their chief function is to provide a quality Christian education for church families;
- Christian colleges are quality academic institutions that have some ties with the church;
- It is a place where a total Christian world view is presented;
- It is a place where you can get as good a private education as anywhere and a lot better than in public institutions;
- Christian colleges function as the mind and conscience of the church;
- The primary purpose for their existence is to indoctrinate students with Church of Christ doctrine;

- The primary purpose is to teach students how to responsibly handle interpretation of the Scriptures, not mere indoctrination;
- They are like a bubble – protecting students from the moral chaos around us;
- They are a marriage service.

You can see that there are a variety of opinions out there about what we are supposed to be doing. Is it any wonder that we stay in hot water with somebody all the time?

Are Christian universities a thermostat – an instrument to change the environment? Or a thermometer – an instrument simply to measure the environment?

Let me offer a couple of observations about what I think our colleges ought to be.

We are **not** the church, but our primary reason for existence is to serve the church and its families by equipping Christian men and women for service and leadership as God gives us the gifts, all to His glory.

Don H. Morris, our legendary president, used to say that the Christian college is an extension of the Christian home. That's an idea worth pondering.

I hope and pray that we can instill in our students a great appreciation for our religious heritage, but more importantly, a deep appreciation and respect for the authority and inspiration of the Scriptures as well as the ability to separate eternal truth from cultural values or traditionalism.

I hope and pray that we can teach them to search continually for the truth of God's Word and learn how to handle it correctly. I trust that we can teach by precept and example that Jesus must be Lord and the church belongs to Him.

The Christian college is not supposed to do the work of the church, but it **is** supposed to do the work of the Lord, and that means evangelism of a lost world and servanthood to a self-centered world.

May God help us figure out **who** we are and **what** we are supposed to be doing as Christian institutions of higher education.

I know one thing – the church has prospered and grown and world missions have prospered and grown where there is a healthy mutual dependence and support between the church and our fine Christian colleges. About two-thirds of missionaries in the churches of Christ have had some kind of preparatory experience at ACU.

Just a final comment on this point of a personal nature. We live in a time where it is popular to bash institutions. Blame the government for all our economic and social problems. Blame the Christian colleges for all our church problems.

We also fall into the trap of believing whatever we read in print, particularly if it is of a critical nature. ACU has

certainly had its share of criticism throughout its existence and it has surfaced again.

As leader of this university, I want to admit to you that we, particularly in our College of Biblical Studies, have not been as responsive and as clear as we should have in dealing with our brotherhood.

I have talked personally with the faculty about this and will continue to do so. In situations where we have been unclear or misleading or even worse, not handled God's Word well, we need to act more responsibly.

In other words, when we "mess up," we ought to be honest enough to "fess up."

On the other hand, let me tell you something about this faculty. **To the person**, every single one of them is deeply committed to Jesus Christ, to His church, to the authority and inspiration of the Scriptures, and to **every** word it teaches, including belief in the virgin birth of Christ – **every one of them!**

I will not put up for five minutes with anything less. I cannot do otherwise, because to do so would be to betray the trust I have been given.

Without getting into more details, let me just say that you will be better served to get your information about ACU from ACU and not from some critical brotherhood paper. You will have to make up your mind which one to believe. You cannot believe both.

I am disappointed by the number of good Christian people who never bother to check out a rumor but readily repeat it; who passively accept whatever criticism they see in print.

I am also saddened that some people would readily believe that we would tolerate anyone in our Bible faculty who denied something as fundamental as the virgin birth or the authority and inspiration of Scriptures.

There won't be agreement on every detail of doctrine. Neither is there in your local congregation. But there **can** and there **must** be agreement on the essentials of the Christian faith, and there **is**.

On the other hand, I am grateful to those who take the time to ask. We will be honest with you and will tell you the truth, because we exist to serve the church and you are the church.

9. We must re-discover that in our allegiance to Christ, the bride wears the name of the groom.

It is the husband's name that we wear, not the bride's. Where is our emphasis – on Christ or on the church? The term "Church of Christ" means that we are a people who belong to Christ. The church does not save. Christ does. He is the head of the body and is supreme

over the church (Col. 1:18).

That's not a cop-out for soft doctrine. That's not even the new hermeneutic. **That's plain gospel!**

10. We must realize that the enemy is Satan and not each other.

There are lots of enemies, the main one being secularism, in my opinion. But what will **really** destroy us and take us away from our mission is if we decide that the real enemy is within our own circle of fellowship.

Surely the Lord grieves when we spend our energy biting and devouring one another while the world goes unsaved. Surely we will be held accountable to God for such neglect.

11. We must determine what the real issues are regarding the role of women in the church.

The Scriptures are clear about the leadership roles in church worship: male leadership, but not dominance; female subjection, but not repression.

In fact, the real issue revolving around women is not even their role in the assembly – I just made reference to that. A greater issue is how males treat females **all the time**, not just in the assembly.

It is unfortunate that our recent discussions have centered around the role of women in the assembly to the neglect of this other theme. One can be an advocate of the leadership of women in the assembly and still treat women in general and women in his family in particular in a rather unchristian way.

I think the Scriptures have plenty to say about that, and it has nothing whatsoever to do with who can pass communion trays or read a public scripture or lead a prayer or preach.

We need to talk about the general treatment of females within our fellowship more than their degree of involvement in the leadership of the assembly. In my opinion, the Scriptures are clear that the called worship service is led by men, as I Timothy 2 teaches.

It also is clear to me that it is the failure of men to assume a proper and biblical role of leadership that has complicated this issue for the church.

12. We must decide on the way Scripture should be interpreted.

"Hermeneutics" is the interpretation of Scripture. It is the **way** we decide to give meaning and application to the text. Historically we have relied on a rather rational approach to the interpretation of Scripture. I say that as a matter of commendation, not as condemnation.

Simply put, the goal under what some now call the "old hermeneutic" is that we are to imitate in God's Word the direct commands or precepts and biblical examples and, where necessary, draw logical inferences.

All of this was to take place with a proper understanding of the meaning of a particular passage within its proper context.

Granted, the old hermeneutic of command, example, and necessary inference has been misused at times by us – particularly in our failure to apply it to the life of Christ with the same vigor we applied it to the epistles and especially to the doctrine of the church.

However, even its occasional misuse does not warrant throwing the whole system of interpretation out for an ill-defined "new hermeneutic" that may be more influenced by our modern culture than by serious biblical inquiry.

As an example, is it coincidence that we developed a controversy about the role of women in the assembly about the time we developed the idea of a new hermeneutic?

It is certainly true that you can't biblically justify the leadership role of women in the assembly by using the old hermeneutic!

Without a doubt, we need to be more Christ-centered in our interpretation of Scripture. But does the only way to do that involve a wholesale abandonment of our traditional ways of interpreting scripture? I think not.

All I am appealing for in this brief treatment of a very complex problem is some balance and some patience with each other. The answer to our dilemma lies neither in a stubborn retention of our old ways simply because that is the only thing we are used to, nor complete abandonment of the old ways out of frustration over its shortcomings.

The old hermeneutic may not be all that bad; the new hermeneutic may not be all that good. Perhaps there is something to be learned from the best of both.

13. We must realize the powerful dynamics of change.

How change is brought about is extremely important. The theme of this Lectureship addresses the issue: how do you advance a changeless Christ in a changing world?

We sometimes resist change by labeling issues as "unscriptural." And yet, even though change is inevitable, how do you hang on to the eternal and the unchanging?

The **attitude** of the change agent is an important factor. When done in an inappropriate manner, change can bring division, **not** over doctrinal matters (though that language may be used), but over the **way** the change was brought about.

The change may in and of itself be within the bounds of Scripture, but there is a lack of consideration for the feelings of others and inadequate time and information is given.

14. Finally, we must re-dedicate ourselves to search relentlessly for truth, which is revealed in the Scriptures.

We have an infallible revelation in Scripture. Unfortunately, we have no infallible interpreters of that revelation: not in our religious papers; not in our Christian colleges; not in our pulpits; and not in our elders' meetings.

We all search with honest and open minds, listening and learning and exchanging ideas and studying to the best of our abilities, relying on the guidance of God's Spirit to lead us to the light of truth as revealed in Scripture. And yes, sometimes even changing our minds.

What is the conclusion of the matter?

Out of all these comments come four questions we cannot afford to ignore:

1. How is the Bible designed to be God's final will for man?
2. Where does tradition and custom and personal preference stop and essential belief and practice begin?
3. How much diversity can we tolerate before fellowship is fractured?
4. Why are we not growing through evangelism?

Our ability and willingness to tackle these difficult questions will determine the outcome of our efforts to restore New Testament Christianity.

We are primarily a church because we are all connected to Christ, the head, not just to each other. We must never forget that.

There are many things in the religious world that are favorable to us if we can unite and move together: erosion of denominational loyalties; and disillusion about denominational superstructures. What a great time for a renewed plea for a **non-denominational** approach to New Testament Christianity, using only the Bible as our guide in faith and practice!

Let me close with some appropriate verses of Scripture for us to ponder.

Romans 14:19 was written by Paul in the context of dealing with our differences.

*"Let us therefore make **every effort** to do what leads to **peace and to mutual edification.**"*

In Jesus' prayer of unity for his followers, in John 17:23, he said:

*"May they be brought to **complete unity** to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved us."*

That's what we need to do to be the church of Jesus Christ.



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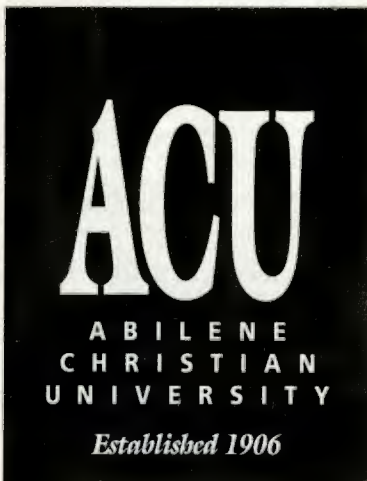
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