



I Will Build My Church?

What is the Church – Part 2

by Tim Kelley

All of us have times in our lives when circumstances cause us to make monumental changes in how we conduct our lives. For many, it's marriage and children. For others, it's a change in career or maybe an accident in our family that causes us to have to change our life-style. For those of us here, we certainly had a life-style change when we came into a better understanding of God and His Torah.

Though marriage and children were certainly a change for me, one of the biggest changes came about 16 years ago when I was put in a position that forced me to make a decision about some of the fundamental things I had been about the Bible for the previous 25 years. Because of events that I'd witnessed during those years, I had grown to be quite cynical when it came to the leadership in not only the church I was attending, but in practically all of mainstream religion. Thus when, back in late 1996 and early 1997, I found myself so frustrated with church leadership, I began to study the concept of church and church government on my own.

One source of information I found was a newsletter called "Servant's News" that was published by a fellow named Norm Edwards. Norm had years before left the organization¹ I was now contemplating leaving and begun his own studies which he published in his newsletter. I got hold of a copy of a current newsletter and found an article entitled "How Does the Eternal Govern Through Humans?"² It was quite a long article and it took many evenings to read. Many good points were made, but one point caused me to take another look. That was his reference to Mathew 16:18-19.

^{ESV} Matthew 16:18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

In his article, he made the case that "the church" was built on Messiah instead of on Peter. He used the difference between the Greek word "petros" (small rock) and "petra" (large rock) to make his point. But that explanation didn't satisfy me even though I was strongly against the thought of the primacy of Peter or any other man who attempts to come between me and God.

Searching deeper into that scripture led to some conclusions that is the basis for the rest of this teaching.

Except for those who practice Catholicism, practically all believers agree the *church* was not built on Peter. And as we discussed last time, the word *church* is not a good translation of the Greek word *ekklesia*. We found that a better translation would be the word *assembly* or *congregation*. Then we found that the Septuagint translated the Hebrew word *kahal* as *ekklesia*, and since ancient Israel was often called *the kahal of YHVH*³, it's quite possible that the assembly being spoken of is actually Israel.

"But Israel isn't new!" you might say. "It's old! In fact, Yeshua was in the midst of the Israelite people – the Jews." How can it be that Yeshua was going to build something new if what He was building already existed?

Maybe He wasn't going to build something new. Maybe He was just going to restore something old.

¹ It was not technically the same organization, but it was predominately the same people with the same structure.

² Servant's News, July 1998; <http://www.servantsnews.com/sn9807/newgov.htm>

³ Deut. 23:2 and elsewhere

As stated last time, I have been a part of the building business for most of my life. For a few years, I made a living building new homes or renovating existing home. When renovating a home, I would sometimes go in and remove the old carpet, wallpaper, fixtures and cabinets and replace them with new or more up-to-date ones. Sometimes, weak or broken framing was shored up and reinforced. In most cases this was done in conjunction with a room addition. I just recently renovated my own home by adding a new bedroom, installing beams to support a sagging part of the roof structure, and replacing the old siding and roof.

So a builder does not always build something new. Sometimes he just fixes up the old – getting rid of the bad and replacing it with good. I believe this is what Yeshua was saying when He said “I will build My assembly”. Let’s look at it.

^{ESV} Matthew 16:18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

In this passage, the Greek word for *build* is *oikodomea* (Strong’s 3618). I checked 19 different versions of this passage and each one of them translated *oikodomea* as *build*. *Oikodomea* is used 39 times in the New Testament, and even though it’s translated *build* 24 times, it’s also translated *edify* 7 times.

According to Strong’s, the primary meaning is “1) to build a house, erect a building 1a) to build (up from the foundation) 1b) to restore by building, to rebuild, repair”⁴. So the word can mean either *build from the ground up*, or *restore a building by rebuilding or repairing it*.

Here are a few passages where *oikodomea* is translated in such a way to imply restoring or supporting something that is already in existence.

^{NKJ} Acts 9:31 Then the churches throughout all Judea, Galilee, and Samaria had peace and were edified. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, they were multiplied.

^{NKJ} 1 Corinthians 8:1 Now concerning things offered to idols: We know that we all have knowledge. Knowledge puffs up, but love edifies.

^{NKJ} 1 Corinthians 10:23 All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful; all things are lawful for me, but not all things edify.

^{NKJ} Galatians 2:17-18 "But if, while we seek to be justified by Christ, we ourselves also are found sinners, is Christ therefore a minister of sin? Certainly not! ¹⁸ "For if I build again those things which I destroyed, I make myself a transgressor.

Thus *oikodomea* can mean to strengthen or rebuild. It doesn’t necessarily mean to build something new. When you place the passage in the context of everything Yeshua said or was said about Him, it becomes evident which meaning is correct. Speaking of the coming Messiah, YHVH says -

"It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the preserved of Israel; I will make you as a light for the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Isaiah 49:6)

From this passage we see that it was (and is) Yeshua’s role to restore Israel and be a light to the nations – the Gentiles – for the purpose of providing salvation to all mankind.

Why would Yeshua speak to Peter and the rest of His disciples about *re-building* the congregation of Israel? Is there a precedent in the Tnakh for re-building a nation that had, for all practical purposes, fallen? Absolutely! The prophets of old, beginning with Moses, speak of how Israel will be broken, scattered, and sown throughout the earth. But they also show that YHVH will rebuild Israel as a people and restore them once again.

⁴ BibleWorks for Windows; Copyright 2003 BibleWorks, LLC; ver. 6.0.005y – Strong’s Dictionary

The Septuagint builds a bridge between the Hebrew text of the Tnakh with the Greek text of the New Testament. Through it, we can see how certain Hebrew words and concepts were transferred into the Greek language from which we get our English Bibles. One of those Hebrew words is *banah* (בנה – Strong's 1129) which means 1) to build, rebuild, establish, cause to continue 1a) (Qal) 1a1) to build, rebuild 1a2) to build a house (ie, establish a family) 1b) (Niphal) 1b1) to be built 1b2) to be rebuilt 1b3) established (of restored exiles)⁵. Using the Septuagint, we find the Greek equivalent is *oikodomea*, the same Greek word we find in our Matthew 16 passage. So let's see how that word is sometimes used in the Tnakh.

The first place we want to look is in Amos 9 since this passage is quoted in the New Testament.

^{NKJ} Amos 9:11 " On that day I will raise up The tabernacle of David, which has fallen down, And repair its damages; I will raise up its ruins, And rebuild (*banah*) it as in the days of old . . ."

This passage is quoted by James when he supports Peter's assertion that the non-Jewish tribes were being brought back. He points out that the Messiah's role is to restore the fallen Tabernacle of David which we've identified to be the broken kingdom of Israel –

Acts 15:16 "After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it . . ."

In this passage it's clear that James believed The Messiah would rebuild the kingdom. In fact, the Greek word used here is *anoikodomeo*, the same word as *oikodomea* but with the "ana" (among, in the midst of, between) prefix which gives it the connotation of building in or among the already existing building. Thus it could be said that Messiah is building a *kahal* - an assembly within the existing assembly of Israel. This assembly might rightly be called the Israel of God (Galatians 6:16), after all, Yeshua is only going to assemble with those who will assemble with Him.

Another Tnakh passage that is quite revealing is found in Isaiah –

^{KJV} Isaiah 58:12 And they that shall be of thee shall build (*banah*) the old waste places: thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in.

This is considered by many to be a Messianic prophecy. It speaks of restoration of the old places, but more importantly, the old paths. This passage would have come to mind as Yeshua's disciples saw Him contend with the Jewish leadership over the proper application of Torah. They would have also considered the reference to the breach – the brokenness of the Kingdom of Israel after the death of Solomon – as they saw Yeshua reach out to the Samaritans and other non-Jews who were turning to the God of Abraham.

This next passage reveals an interesting idea when quoted from the JPS Tnakh –

^{TNK} Isaiah 58:12 Men from your midst shall rebuild ancient ruins, You shall restore foundations laid long ago. And you shall be called "Repairer of fallen walls, Restorer of lanes for habitation."

Though it may not have been evident at the time, the *men from your* (Yeshua's) *midst*, i.e. His disciples were given the task of rebuilding by taking the gospel of the kingdom to all nations.

Though there are many more passages we could reference in this regard, this one seems to sum up the expectation the disciples would have had of the coming Messiah –

^{KJV} Jeremiah 24:6 For I will set mine eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them again to this land: and I will build (*banah*) them, and not pull them down; and I will plant them, and not pluck them up.

⁵ BibleWorks for Windows; Copyright 2003 BibleWorks, LLC; ver. 6.0.005y – Strong's Dictionary

The disciples were clearly looking for a Messiah who would rebuild Israel to its former greatness. Yeshua's reference to Himself being that builder accompanied by His actions up to that time would have caused them to begin to understand that He was not just another Jewish teacher, but the promised Messiah.

So let's consider this re-translation of the Matthew 16:18 passage that most translators tend to mis-translate –

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will re-build my assembly, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

I want to touch on the last part of the Matthew passage and propose a somewhat different understanding from what is commonly offered –

^{ESV} Matthew 16:18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, **and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.**

There are a number of understandings of what Yeshua was telling His disciples, and I believe most of them are wrong, simply because most Bible students believe that Yeshua was building something new – the church – instead of restoring something old – Israel. But armed with the understanding that the "church" is the *assembly*, the *kahal* of Israel, the people whom YHWH had scattered and had promised to restore at the end time, and that Israel's primary fault was *idolatry* – they simply wanted to worship YHWH the same way they pagans worshipped their gods – we can properly understand what Yeshua was saying. Let's look at the context of Matthew to pick up a few points of interest.

In Matthew 16:13 we find Yeshua walking with His disciples at or near Caesarea Philipi, a town about 25 miles north of His home in Capernaum. He had just performed a number of miracles including walking on water, healing a blind man, and feeding over 5000 people with two fish and five loaves of bread.

Caesarea Philipi is not the same as Caesarea on the coast of the Mediterranean. It is at the base of Mt. Hermon, the highest spot in Israel. It's an ancient Roman city named after Herod the Great's son Phillip. Prior to the Roman occupation it was called Paneas because of its association with the Greek god Pan who was the god of the wild. He is pictured as a man with the hindquarters and horns of a goat.

Paneas was built on top of a sheer rock face over 100 feet tall and 500 feet wide. In this rock face a number of niches were cut to hold statues of Pan and other Greek gods. At the base of the rock stood a temple to Pan. Ruins of the temple are still visible today. Just beyond the Temple was a huge cave out of which flowed an underground spring. Since, at that time, no one was able to go in the cave (because of the water), and because of its association with the pagan gods, this cave was called "the Gates of Hell". This huge rock face, cave, and temple were all a symbol of idol worship in the first century.

I believe that when Yeshua made reference to the Gates of Hell, He was speaking specifically of this place. He may have been standing at that place at the moment He made the proclamation. What He would have been telling His disciples is that He was going to begin rebuilding the Kingdom of Israel, but this time His people would have a different heart. Instead of falling into idol worship and paganism as they had done so much before, His true followers would flee from any form of idolatry. There again, this statement would probably bring a particular prophecy to the minds of His disciples –

^{KJV} Hosea 14:1 O Israel, return to the LORD your God, For you have stumbled because of your iniquity; ² Take words with you, And return to the LORD. Say to Him, "Take away all iniquity; Receive us graciously, For we will offer the sacrifices of our lips. ³ Assyria shall not save us, We will not ride on horses, Nor will we say anymore to the work of our hands, 'You are our gods.' For in You the fatherless finds mercy." ⁴ " I will heal their backsliding, I will love them freely, For My anger has turned away from him. ⁵ I will be like the dew to Israel; He shall grow like the lily, And lengthen his roots like Lebanon. ⁶ His branches shall spread; His beauty shall be like an olive tree, And his fragrance like Lebanon. ⁷ Those who dwell under his shadow shall return; They shall be revived like grain, And grow like a vine. Their scent shall be like the wine of Lebanon. ⁸ " Ephraim shall say,

'What have I to do anymore with idols?' I have heard and observed him. I am like a green cypress tree; Your fruit is found in Me."

Shalom Aleichem