

State of the Church Part 1: Christ and His Church

Matthew 16:13-20

**Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on Sunday morning,
January 8, 2023**

The First One

Two hundred and thirty years ago today, the country's first and greatest President George Washington presented the very first State of the Union address. It was presented in New York City at Federal Hall. At less than eleven hundred words, it was and remains the shortest State of the Union.

In this short speech, Washington called on the united chambers of Congress to promote science and literature and to raise a sufficiently trained and adequately resourced standing army to defend and protest the ever-increasing borders of the young country. He impressed upon Congress the need for a naturalization process for the growing tide of immigration.

Congress would enact policies in all of those areas, passing legislation dealing with invention patents, publication copyrights, armed forces subsidies and the nation's first immigration legislation.

This morning, we will begin a two-part sermon series that is, more or less, a State of the Church address. We will look at what Jesus had to say about His (Capital C) Church in Matthew 16 and also Peter's confession of truth. We will consider what last year meant for our (lowercase "c") church and we will look ahead into 2023 and beyond. And we will begin to think about the actions we will need to take as we will follow God's great plan for our church. I invite you to open your Bibles to Matthew 16 this morning. (read text)

Who is the Son of Man?

Caesarea Philippi was initially a Syrian city near the Baniyas River near the Golan Heights. It was a pagan Syrian city with a temple to worship Baal. Then the Greeks conquered the region and founded a city called Panias there in the region known to the Greeks as Panion. It was an important Greco-Roman city. Both Panion and Panias are names derived from the flute playing nymph creature in Greek mythology named Pan. There was, at one time, a large, white, beautiful temple for Pan there and worship of Pan would continue through the life and ministry of Christ and beyond.

The city Panias was given by Caesar Augustus to Herod the Great in 20 BCE. Herod the Great built four massive temples across the region, one of them being at Panias. When Herod the Great died, his son Philip the Tetrarch changed the name to Caesarea Philippi. As was Herodian tradition, he named the city after both his Roman benefactor and himself.

It was an important city with trade routes that crossed there on the way to the sea. And it was a vast mix of spiritual experiences. There was still Baal worship happening there when Jesus takes the disciples there. The temple to Pan was also still working. And rising beautifully and majestically above the entire city was the massive temple in honor of the Roman Emperor. All of this spiritual syncretism blended in with the Judaism that spread after the Maccabean revolt.

It is here, in this setting, when Jesus asks the disciples “Who do the people say the Son of Man is?” Up to that point in His ministry, Jesus has used the relatively enigmatic expression “Son of Man” as a title to reveal His true identity and mission. It was by far the most popular title that He would use, and we see it over 100 times in the Gospels. Other titles He may have rightfully claimed, such as Messiah or Son of David, often evoked a popular militaristic and political understandings. This would cause people to overlook the spiritual salvation and freedom that Jesus truly came to offer.

And here, having concluded His ministry in Galilee, he asks the disciples not only what the people had come to understand about Jesus, but also, and more importantly, what these close followers understand about Him.

“Who do the people say that the Son of Man is?” It is an interesting question to ask in this melting pot of various religions and spiritual expressions. And the response is striking. They have heard reports from people about their understanding of the identity of the Son of Man.

There are some claims that they think Jesus is reincarnated as John the Baptist. Philip the Tetrarch’s own brother, Herod Antipas, thought this was the case. Other reports consider Jesus to be Elijah, Isaiah, or even Jeremiah. We see this pagan idea of reincarnation mingling in with Judaism. Reincarnation was heavily taught by the philosopher Plato and that must’ve filtered around the Greco-Roman empire.

It is not enough to simply connect the Son of Man with the prophetic expectation generally, though. So Jesus then presses the disciples.

He has taught them directly about His identity and His mission. Now those twelve must give an account for whom they understand Jesus to be. “But what about you? Who do you say that I am?”

Peter’s Confession

Peter declared that “You are the Messiah (or the Christ). The Son of the living God. Understand that before this moment in Matthew’s Gospel, the title Messiah or Christ. Christ is an English transliteration of the Greek term *Christos*, which itself is a translation of the Hebrew word for “anointed” (*masiah*).

Peter called Jesus the Anointed One, the Messiah. This promised King would be the light of hope for Israel. Peter further expressed Jesus’s identity as “the Son of the *living* God.” That is an expression that carries heavy significance in a place with a lot of gods being worshiped. Peter declares that Jesus is the Son of the God that is living, not some mythical, superstitious figure carved in stone. This confession is the fullest understanding of who Jesus was up to that point.

Jesus points out that there is unique blessing behind this revelation. It could only have come from God the Father. It certainly did not come from the people in Caesarea Philippi. It did not even come from Peter’s father, Jonah. This confession is shared by all the disciples (Matthew 14:33). This view was commonly held by the disciples.

Jesus makes some grand pronouncements after this great confession. Peter is a rock, and he will be foundational, along with other apostles, in establishing the Church (Ephesians 2:20). Peter will be the first leader among the apostles, but he fulfilled that role and then the baton is passed to James and to Paul. As Jesus makes this great proclamation about the establishment of His Church, the Lord does more.

Jesus looks down the corridor of history and makes a bold declaration, and an absolute promise, that His Church will endure to the end of the age. The gates of Hades are not a match. It is interesting because Hades, or Sheol, was known to be the realm of the dead. Gates were essential to the security and might of a city. Gates indicate power. The gates of Hades can also mean the power of death.

Jesus promises that death will not overpower His own family of faith, the Church. The Church will never die. Jesus's victory over death is living proof that He will continue to build his church against all of the forces of death.

Big C and Little c

For those living today, while the Church will not die, a lot of churches certainly are. Baptisms have been in decline in America since 1952. Average church attendance dropped from 137 to 65 in the past two decades. In 2021, almost 5000 churches closed across America. It looks as if that number might have tripled to close to 15,000 in 2022. For the first time in our country's history, less than 50% of the population claims to attend church.

Most churches are running at anywhere from 36-60% of pre-Covid numbers. In 2021, each Southern Baptist Church averaged around 3 baptisms for the year and in 2022 that number is also expected to be lowered. And considering that 10% of SBC churches reported almost 85% of the annual baptisms, that means that almost three out of every four churches baptized zero people in 2022. Churches have almost all but given up on outreach and sharing the Gospel. It is all they can do to keep the doors open and the lights on.

Across denominations, churches are shrinking, doors are closing, and people are leaving. Covid didn't cause these problems. It exposed the attitudes behind the problems. All of this means that the powers of death are making great gains.

And while people are bailing out on churches, 2021 and 2022 marked the largest statistical increase in church splits since the mid-19th century. Entire denominations are splitting apart now just as they were about a hundred and sixty years ago. Then it was about slavery. Now it is about this religious syncretism of a creeping cultural and pagan liturgy growing across churches. Church staffs were forced to downsize or cut back. 67% of churches in 2021 saw shifts in this regard, and those numbers are speculated to be consistent in 2022.

Which brings me to First Baptist Martinsburg in 2022. While all of that was happening across our nation, while churches were dying and denominations were splitting, and people were bailing and the gospel was not advancing, that was NOT the case for us at all. At all.

First Baptist Church of Martinsburg baptized 11 people in 2022. We met the giving goals set for the special missions' offerings in 2022. We saw over 200 people engaged in weekly Biblical community in 2022. This represents almost 66% growth over 2021. Twenty-six Biblical Community groups met regularly – 14 on Sunday mornings, 12 throughout the week in 2022. We started TEN NEW Biblical Community Groups in 2022. Our worship attendance increased over 35% in 2022. Vacation Bible School increased over 25% in 2022. We hired a Worship Ministry Coordinator and have already seen our worship ministry expand in dynamic ways in 2022. Most importantly, we shared the Gospel with over 4000 Berkeley County residents through TWELVE Outreach Events in 2022.

We do outreach well. We have a plan, a strategy to invite people to church. We want to connect and engage with them and build relationships with them. We are created for community and true life change will not come from sitting or standing in a room with people for an hour. It comes through relationships, through friendships. So we reach through relationships better than most any church I have ever seen.

We are committed to share the Gospel. And over the course of this year, you will see that commitment deepen and intensify. We will ask some very difficult questions of our committees, teams, and ministries. We are going to challenge them to stop imitating the world and start contextualizing the Gospel.

We will continue to offer opportunities to grow deeper. We want to strengthen our discipleship. We have a lot of great options within our Biblica Community umbrella. But we want more. We want to reach more people and we want to equip more and more.

We are going to continue to change, to continue to challenge ourselves to share the gospel as often as we can with as many people as we can.

We are a welcoming and engaging congregation. We fellowship well. We share life together well. We do a good job of offering opportunities to grow in faith and we will continue to develop in that area. I enjoy our worship. And in a time when other churches are letting staff go, we hired a worship ministry coordinator to expand our worship. We are already seeing the wonderful benefit of adding Justin and Salena to our staff team.

We do have some areas that need to be improved. We must strengthen and emphasize missions in our church's DNA. We must develop some strategic partnerships and see more of the congregation involved in this.

We also need to be on the same page. There have been some bumps in our road to unity. We have decided too often that our own patterns of comfort and habits are more important than coming together in worship. If the schedule changes, too many of us choose to stay home. I don't know if that is some form of silent protest on your part or if it is just rigidity to adapt. Either way, it is something I challenge you to change. If it is rigidity to change your schedule, I say that you are not reading the Scripture closely enough. God likes to change plans and schedules. Ask Jonah. Ask Paul. Ask Philip the evangelist.

And if it is some form of silent protest against me or some decision we've made in leadership, you need to know one thing. It isn't working. Look at what we did in 2022. God is moving. Good things are happening. Give it a chance. You will be surprised at what you discover. There are some incredible people that I guarantee you have never met coming to worship in this church. So much is happening and there are so many opportunities to be with each other, that if you don't know someone, that is your own fault. Look at the list below. See all of those things? We will probably do a list longer than that this year. Start with Faith at Home with us. Come be a part. Don't skip something because it is new or different. Embrace it and then build relationships with new people.

First Baptist Church of Martinsburg is determined to not let the powers of death prevail. Lots of churches close. But the Church will never die. We want to do what we can for as long as we can with as many resources as we can until the Lord decides to end it, take us home or Jesus returns.

The Christ

Two thousand years ago, Jesus took his disciples to a town called Caesarea Philippi, a city located at the northernmost border of Israel, a town some considered to be the boundary between Israel and the world. It was a city bestowed to Herod the Great by Emperor Augustus Caesar. Herod's son Philip the Tetrarch rebuilt this city and then renamed it after both the Roman Emperor and himself.

Towering above Jesus as the Lord taught His disciples in the city was a massive, beautiful white marble temple built in honor of the Roman Emperor. Also in this city of great religious diversity was the temple to the Syrian god Baal and the Greek god Pan. Here in this astounding setting, in this global village, this city of syncretism, this pantheon of world religions, Jesus asks his followers, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter’s response was to affirm that Christ and Christ alone was King. Not Caesar. Not Baal. Not Pan. Not any other so-called gods of this world. Those gods are dead. “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” The one and *only* living God. The one to whom *all* authority has been given and all allegiance and glory is due. Jesus. The Christ. The Son of the Living God.

Our church here has been around for 155 years, and it will continue to be around for the foreseeable future.

We will repent from devoting any portion of our hearts, our lives, to any other created, dead gods.

We will release the grasp on things here that limit us or hinder us from pursuing the Kingdom’s glory and the Gospel’s advancement – including worldly liturgies and structures and concepts that simply are not Biblically established and God-honoring.

We will raise those newly freed hands up to the Lord and praise and worship Him for all He has and will continue to do for us.

We will pursue unity and extend grace to each other.

We will share the gospel with *at least* 5000 people in 2023 and begin to make an impact in our neighborhoods. We will leave behind the “you gotta come to us here” attitude and embrace the art of neighboring for the sake of the Gospel.

We will remember that Christ is the head of the Church, and He will not let the power of death prevail over it. We will live and walk by faith this year in His promised power and provision.

Appendix: 2022 At a Glance

Daily Advent devotionals
Virtual Christmas service
Participate in downtown churches walking tour
FX412 Christmas party
Churchwide Christmas caroling
Youth and Children's Ministry at Martinsburg Christmas parade
Christmas Choir program
Pancakes and pajamas
Ladies taste of Christmas with Young Lives group
Planksgiving – Youth Thanksgiving Fellowship
Deacon ordination
Pre-teen lock-in
Count your Blessings service at Mt. Zion
Light the Night Outreach
FX412 Corn maze
Children's Trip to Orr's Pumpkin Patch
FCA Fields of Faith youth event
FX 412 Level Up
FBC Secret Sisters Luncheon
New Women's Biblical community group began in fall
Four Middle and high school biblical community groups started in fall
Men's biblical community group started in fall on Monday evenings
Pastors class on Sunday mornings
FX412 Pool Party
FX412 Welcome Wagon at Tilt
11 baptisms – several at a special service at a swimming pool.
I'm A Christian Now Classes
Messy Kid Olympics
FX412 Summer of Service: Martinsburg Rescue Mission
FX412 Summer of Service: Horses for Hearts
FX412 Summer of Service: Burke St Elem. Back to School Carnival
Youth High School float trip
Worship at Ridge Road
Summit Youth Summer Camp
Centrikid Children's Summer Camp
VBS Wrap Up Pool Party
Faith builders VBS
Summer kick off camp out
Table talk events
Church softball team

Cupcake decorating class
Graduate Sunday
Tissue drive for local school
Baby dedications on Mother's Day and also in December
FX412 Paint Ball Fellowship
Journey to the Cross Good Friday worship event
Maundy Thursday Lunch and Service
Easter Sunrise Service and regular services
Fed Musselman Band
Hired Worship Ministry Leader
Glow in the dark Easter egg hunt
Church skating
Booth at Martinsburg Home Show
Men's BaconFest Breakfast
Church wide bowling
Served breakfast two Mill Creek and Bunker Hill schools
FX412 Super Bowl Party – Bored of the Game fellowship
Soup'r'Chili Bowl
Parents Night Out
Breakfast for Faith Christian Academy Staff
Sweetheart's Brunch
Move Up Sundaes children's Sunday School promotion event
FBC Kids Wrap-Up Party
Youth Mission Trip to Ohio
Youth Evangelism Conference in Clarksburg WV
FBC Kids weekly Wednesday program
FX412 Youth weekly program
Faith at Home multi-generational event
AHG Scouting Sunday
AHG National Day of Service: Horses for Hearts
AHG CampoRee
AHG Operation Christmas Child packing
AHG South Berkeley parade float
AHG Christmas party
AHG Wreaths Across America at Antietam Cemetery

FURTHER THOUGHTS:

What are your earliest recollections about going to church?

What friendships made an impact on you in churches that you've attended?
How did those relationships develop?

What passages in Scripture encourage and shape your understanding of what the Church is supposed to do and be?

Jesus makes a grand proclamation after Peter's great confession. How does that proclamation encourage you?

Look back at the Appendix. What things do you remember from last year?
What stands out?

As we consider what 2022 meant to us and our spiritual formation, what is our testimony about God from last year? How did He bless and help and strengthen and shape us?

Who are some people that you met in church in 2022? How are they a blessing in your life?

Matthew 12:48-50 talks about the Church being Jesus's family of faith. How does the promise he makes in Matthew 16:13-20 impact your understanding of the Church?