

Breaking Through

By Rev. Dan Gilbert, Northern Illinois District President
Originally printed in *The Northern Light*, January/February 2015



Jesus promised to build his church on the rock of faith, which the Apostle Peter confessed: “You [Jesus] are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” (Matthew 16:18)

And then Jesus further promised that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church. We all know those words, believe those words and find comfort in those words.

So how do you picture those words? How do you picture the gates of hell not prevailing against the church? If you were asked to describe it, what would you say?

Most Christians I hear say something like, “That means that the church will remain until the Lord’s return; all the attacks of hell cannot prevail against the church.”

But is that what the words of the Lord say here? That statement is certainly true—the Holy Christian Church will remain on earth until Jesus returns. But is that what he says in Matthew 16:18?

Look at the words again: “...I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” In these words the Lord is talking about defense, so clearly there’s offense as well. Who’s in the defensive mode in Jesus’ words? It’s not the church; it’s hell. So if hell is on the defense, who’s on the offense, who’s attacking hell?

Just let that rattle around in your soul for a little while and we’ll get back to it.

A Church Under Attack

The church is under constant attack, to be sure. We are attacked by the devil, by the world and by our own sinfulness. A trusted, revered and loved church leader falls into moral failure. Marriage is redefined by the world, ignoring God’s definition. False doctrine creeps into churches—and often becomes established there.

The list goes on: parking lot discussions (read “gossip/slander”) after worship or meetings; looking at porn (“it’s just ‘light’ porn”); selfishness in offerings and alms-giving; this habitual sin or that; congregations that serve themselves but not their neighbors. All these are the result of attacks by devil, world and flesh.

And so we pray, “Lead us not into temptation.” And we remember our Catechism and confess, “Although we are attacked by these things, we pray that we may finally overcome them and win the victory.” Jesus promises that *we will overcome* and obtain the victory.

Are we attacked? You bet. Do we always prevail? Not always at the moment. But will we finally overcome them? Yes, Jesus who died and rose again for our sins promises that.

A Church Set for War

The church is attacked collectively and each one of us individually, but that’s not what Jesus is talking about in Matthew 16:18. Here, the gates of hell are under attack, and those gates will not prevail.

So who’s attacking hell? The devil is not attacking himself; the world is not attacking him; our own sinful nature doesn’t attack him. So the attacker is you-know-what.

Jesus said, “The gates of hell will not prevail against ‘IT.’” And “it” is the church.

Is your congregation attacking hell? Is it on the offense? Are you part of the church’s offensive mission?

When the church goes out to pursue the lost, it is literally attacking hell’s stronghold on precious souls that God does not want to perish but rather to be saved. (John 3:16)

And what are the weapons? When we look at the spiritual warfare language in Ephesians 6 we find a list of them. Most are defensive, and that’s good since the church is under attack. But we also find one offensive weapon: the Sword of the Spirit *which is the Word of God*.

Those words are packed.

First, there’s the Word of God made flesh, our Lord and Savior Jesus. He crushed the serpent’s head on the cross when he bore our sins and took our punishment and bought our forgiveness. He turned death into a temporary sleep with his resurrection and the promise of ours. And he left nothing for us to do to complete it: sin is paid for, Jesus is risen, death is dead. He did it all. Gates of hell: shattered; prisoners: set free.

Then there’s the written Word of God, specifically that Good News of salvation through Jesus. And we remember the “Visible Gospel,” the Sacraments as well. The Gospel, the Good News, is the power of God for salvation. When we guard our doctrine we are making sure we’re well-equipped for battle. When we confess the faith to our neighbors, usually paving the way through acts of kindness and then giving the reason for the hope within us, then yes, we literally are attacking the gates of hell.

The way we’ve been describing that here in the district is “New Starts...New Believers,” always looking for an opportunity to start new, ongoing outreach to our neighbors through good deeds and Good News. Note that I said, “ongoing.” One-time events can be good and appropriate, but we really send a message to our unbelieving neighbors when we keep at it.

It’s hard work; we may not see the victory right away. But when the church goes on the offensive with the Word of God, hell will not prevail. The church will break through. Our risen Lord promises it.

