

BIBLE LIFE MESSAGES

What is the Church?

Matthew 16: 13-18

1 What is the church?

In Matthew, chapter 16, verses 13 through 18, Lord Jesus tells us that He built it. So we should know what it is. Right? 2

It says, When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. 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. 3

Notice, in this last verse, it says, The gates of Hades will not overcome it! The visual word picture here

appears to be an army marching against a fortified city.

The Roman soldiers would line up, shoulder to shoulder, with their shields in front of them, and march toward the enemy. All the enemy could see was this wall of shields progressing toward them. ⁴

Now, the region of Caesarea Philippi was associated in both Jewish and Greek literature with the gateway to the underworld. This region, at the foot of Mount Hermon in the Old Testament, was called Bashan where the evil idol worshipping giants lived. ¹ When people thought of this place they thought of the pathway to death (Hades) - a one-way trip with an impregnable gate!

Many of us picture the church being this fortified city that the armies of Satan are unable to penetrate. ⁵ But the original language here pictures just the opposite. ⁶

¹ Deuteronomy 2:10 - The Emmites used to live there — a people strong and numerous, and as tall as the Anakites. and Deuteronomy 3:11 - Only Og king of Bashan was left of the remnant of the Rephaites. His bed was made of iron and was more than thirteen feet long and six feet wide.

The world is the fortification and the castle gates are not able to withstand the onslaught of the mighty army of the Lord, His church!

So, what is the church? ⁷

Let's first start out describing . . .

I. What the Church is Not!

What the church is not! ⁸

It is not this building. It is not a physical place. It's not where we meet. Isn't that what we mean when we say, "I'll be at the church in a few minutes." "Hope to see you at church Sunday." ⁹

It is not the worship service on Sundays. It is not what we do when we get together. "We'll see you at Bible School and church tomorrow morning." ¹⁰

It's not me, the pastor. Nor is it a not-for-profit corporation, an institution which has ecclesiastical authority.

The popular concept of what church is comes from exposure to the polity of the Catholic Churches; Roman and Orthodox, through the centuries. ¹¹

They have a group of people, called clergy, that have been ordained by God to fully represent Him. ¹² Through the years each generation of new clergy are ordained “by the laying on of hands” by the former generation. This line of authority is traced back to the Apostle Peter in Rome. ¹³ These clergy have exclusive ministries that only they can perform. They are “priests”, mediating between God and ordinary people. ¹⁴ They also control all other ministry. ¹⁵ They operate within a rigid chain of command with the ultimate authority residing in their Commander and Chief, the Pope in Rome. ¹⁶ They are governed by canon law, an official interpretation of scripture.

There are other religious organizations that continue to foster the common idea of church apart from the Catholic arena. ¹⁷ They focus on charismatic leaders who claim to speak for God. Some call themselves

prophets. There are even some denominational churches who consider their pastors in this regard. ¹⁸

So what is the church? This is . . .

II. What the Church Is!

What the church is! ¹⁹

The word “church” here, ² in the original language, is simply an assembly, those who have been “called out” from a group for a purpose.

This meaning developed in the New Testament. ²⁰ The church became God’s household, ³ His house, ⁴ ²¹ His **spiritual house.** ⁵ ²²

The church is also described as **God’s temple.** First Corinthians, chapter 3, verse 16, **Don’t you know that**

² ἐκκλησία.

³ Ephesians 2:19-20 - you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.

⁴ Hebrews 3:6 - Christ is faithful as a son over God’s house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.

⁵ I Peter 2:5 - you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you. Again, in chapter 6, verse 19, Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? ²³

You and I are the living stones in this house. First Peter, chapter 2, verse 5, you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ²⁴

How was this word used throughout the New Testament? ²⁵ It was used for a secular crowd in the 19th chapter of Acts. In verse 32 it is used for the mob that gathered against the Apostle Paul in Ephesus. ⁶ ²⁶ In verse 39, a city official, addressing this crowd, said, **If there is anything further you want to bring up, it must be settled in a legal assembly.** ²⁷

This word was also used generally of **the body of Christians throughout the world.** Galatians, chapter 1,

⁶ Acts 19:32 - The assembly was in confusion: Some were shouting one thing, some another. Most of the people did not even know why they were there.

verse 13, **For you have heard of my previous way of life in Judaism, how intensely I persecuted the church of God and tried to destroy it.** ²⁸ **Ephesians 5, verse 23, For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior.** ²⁹ **And, again, in Hebrews, chapter 12, verses 22 and 23, You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.** ³⁰

This word also refers to **the church of a city**, which may have been made up of several congregations. We have the Church of Antioch, ⁷ ³¹ the Church of God at Corinth, ⁸ ³² the Church at Jerusalem, ⁹ ³³ and the Church at Ephesus. ¹⁰ ³⁴

The word finally is used for **local congregations** usually meeting in a house. Romans, chapter 16, verse 5, **Greet also the church that meets at their**

⁷ Acts 13:1 - In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers.

⁸ I Corinthians 1:2 - To the church of God in Corinth . . .

⁹ Acts 8:1 - On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem

¹⁰ Revelation 2:1 - "To the angel" of the church in Ephesus.

house. ³⁵ And then, again, in Colossians, chapter 4, verse 15, **Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.** ³⁶

So, the church is you and me! It is the gathering of people, called by God, to be His children. ³⁷

We are the church whether we are together or separate because we are God's family. ³⁸ We don't have to meet in this building to be the church. ³⁹ We don't have to be a California not-for-profit corporation to be the church. ⁴⁰

We are simply called. We are called **saints**; ¹¹ who are those who have been set apart from the world. ¹² We are holy ones! ⁴¹

We are called **the way**. ¹³ God's way in contrast to the way of the world. Acts, chapter 24, verse 22, **Then**

¹¹ ἅγιος.

¹² Romans 1:7 - To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints.

¹³ τῆς ὁδοῦ.

Felix, who was well acquainted with the Way, adjourned the proceedings. ⁴²

So what does the church do that separates us from the ways of the world? **The church obeys and serves God by witnessing to the world, ¹⁴ ₄₃ baptizing those who surrendered to the Lordship of Christ, ¹⁵ ₄₄ making disciples of the new in faith, ¹⁶ ₄₅ by fellowshiping and agreeing together with the same mind and heart, ¹⁷ ₄₆ by encouraging, teaching and supporting one another on our Christian journey, ¹⁸ ₄₇**

¹⁴ Acts 8:4 - Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went.

¹⁵ Acts 2:40-41 - With many other words he warned them; and he pleaded with them, "Save yourselves from this corrupt generation." Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.

¹⁶ Acts 2:42 - They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

¹⁷ II Corinthians 13:11 - Aim for perfection, listen to my appeal, be of one mind, live in peace.

¹⁸ I Thessalonians 5:11 - Therefore encourage one another and build each other up.

and by helping the needy in practical ways with food, clothing and shelter. ¹⁹

Christian can grow closer to one another as the family of God even in remote locations. As an Army family we lived in Europe and South Korea as well as multiple places in the United States. Despite language and cultural differences we were close to our brothers and sisters in Christ. Christians have family all over the world! ⁴⁸

So, what is the church? It's the body of Christ. It's the family of God. It's the way of truth.

It's the kingdom on earth (and in heaven). It's God's rule in our hearts!

<http://biblelifemessages.org>

¹⁹ Acts 2:44-45 - All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.