

What is a Church?

Matthew 16:13 ESV (Pg. 480) Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” **14** And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” **15** He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” **16** Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” **17** And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. **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. **19** I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” **20** Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

- I. We have spent the last 12 months talking about different aspects of doctrine and church life: 5 weeks talking about what it means to be saved in our “PROOF” series; 10 weeks explaining what we believe doctrinally; a series on the mission of the church (what she should be doing); the true and deeper meaning of baptism and the Lord’s Supper; how Christians are to glorify God in their bodies; we discussed church government and discipline, worship and fellowship.
 - A. In the next three weeks, hopefully all these things will be summarized and distilled into a better understanding of what it means to share life with the body of Jesus Christ, in deep covenant, with the church through membership, or, as I prefer “covenant partnership”.
 1. This week we are going to make our “closing arguments” about what the church is meant to be, in the mind of God expressed in scripture.
 2. Next week we will talk specifically about why covenant partnership in the church matters, and why all believers are called to it, with no exceptions. The following week we will tell you how to participate in just such a covenant.
 3. This is not some novel idea, or the latest trend, but the the way churches have tried to “live out” the kingdom since the Apostles. It’s also the culmination of a 4-year journey, allowing us to be on a more biblical footing.
 - B. Jonathan Leeman defines what a local church is: “A local church is a group of Christians who regularly gather in Christ’s name to officially affirm and oversee one another’s membership in Jesus Christ and his kingdom through gospel preaching and gospel ordinances.”¹ (Baptism and the Lord’s Supper)
 - C. To really understand what the church is, we must understand that It has both an **institutional**, as well as an **organic** dimension.² When I say “institutional”, I am referring to the structure and boundaries that make a church recognizable. By “organic” I am referring to all the intangible things that make a church a church. Let me provide a couple of analogies to help you understand what I’m saying.
 1. Marriage is another thing that is both institutional and organic.
 - a) The organic element is the companionship and admiration, the sexual intimacy, the shared confidences and tender encouragements.
 - b) The institution, though, is based on my vow, the ceremony and the law of God; limiting my sharing of the organic parts with one woman, as

opposed to any woman. If that institutional limitation did not exist, my marital covenant would not exist³. Our society is filled with examples of people who have rejected the institution of marriage in favor of the organic experience only, and it has only led to heartache and despair.

2. The organic element of the church is the face, the skin, the hair that makes the body beautiful; the institutional element is the bones that give the body shape and structure, so its not a gooey mass! The organic element is the wine bringing flavor and exhilaration; the institutional element that the glass that holds it, so it doesn't spill through our fingers and become useless⁴.
- D. If the church **were not** an institution, it could not be defined. No one would know what was and was not the church! But if the church was **only** an institution with no organic nature, it would be cold, lifeless, and ineffective. Churches can lean toward shapeless indistinctness (all organic), or dead institution. Our goal is to be both Biblically institutional, and spiritually organic.
- II. Matthew 16 is Christ's defining statement on both aspects of church. Matthew says this exchange happens in Caesarea Philippi. He isn't just giving us geographical information. He's telling us about the very nature of the place where they are.
 - A. In the Old Testament, this region was known for worship of Ba'al Gad, the Canaanite god of luck. The Greeks, named the place Paneas, after Pan, the god of the wild. In Christ's time, Philip the Tetrarch, the puppet king of Israel, changed the name to Caesarea Philippi, in order to honor both himself and the emperor, Augustus Caesar, whom the Romans looked to as deity⁵.
 1. It was in this place, dedicated so often to so many false gods, that Jesus asks his disciples, **"Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"** This was not merely "opinion polling". He was confronting the disciples about the surrounding culture's assessment of himself in a place that had a lot to say about the subject of to whom one should devote their worship.
 2. Everyone in their day had an opinion of who Jesus was. Some said he was a resurrected prophet, or the recently beheaded John the Baptist.
 - a) Not much has changed! Its not hard to find people ready to talk about Jesus! The question is, which Jesus are they talking about? The One presented in the Bible, or a fictitious one from their own minds?
 - b) The Jehovah's Witnesses believe that Jesus is a created being, not equal to the Father. Muslims believe that he was a prophet, though not even the greatest of the prophets. Some secularists believe that he Jesus a good man, a great teacher, or welfare advocate, but certainly nothing more.
 - B. But none of these opinions matter, no matter how sincerely held. Jesus wants us to believe the truth. He gives us no permission to ride the coattails of our family, country or church. So he gets a lot more personal, and asks the disciples a more pressing question: **"But who do you say that I am?"**
 1. Simon Peter, as he so often did, speaks up for the rest of the group. But his answer doesn't come from book learning, or a brash opinion. Instead, it comes from a deep well of revelation that comes rushing out of his lips...
 2. **"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."**
- III. Jesus then makes a clear statement about his purpose - not merely to save penitent individuals, but to unite them as representatives of his kingdom in the

church! “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. 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.”

- A. Christ’s first statement has to do with the initial **organic** experience that the true members of the body experience; the revelation from the Holy Spirit about Jesus that leads us to place our trust in him for salvation.
 - 1. By the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit, Peter confessed that Jesus is the promised, long-awaited Messiah; that he is not just some military conqueror, but, greater than all of those, has **come** from God, and **is** God Himself!
 - 2. Jesus points out that this knowledge wasn’t something Peter figured out, but was a gift from the Father. It wasn’t something he could accomplish on his own, but once God revealed it to him, it was no longer something he could resist or deny. He was from now on the captive of this revelation!
- B. But more than that, Jesus tells Peter that he will build the **institution** of his church on the same revelation and confession from others for the rest of time.
 - 1. Nobody becomes a part of the church that Christ is building without a revelation from beyond their intellect which leads to a confession of Jesus Christ as Lord!
 - 2. **Romans 10:8 ESV** But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); **9** because, if you **confess** with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and **believe** in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. **10** For with the heart one **believes** and is justified, and with the mouth one **confesses** and is saved. **11** For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” **12** For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. **13** For “**everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.**”
- C. The first thing we must acknowledge about the institution of the church is that it is a **community of confessors**. They are confessors marked by belief in Christ, expressed in repentance, demonstrated by baptism, evidenced by the pursuit of holiness and submission to one another in mutual discipleship.
 - 1. Confessed faith is the mark that someone is a part of Christ’s church. Not mere attendance, giving or even serving (though those are important).
 - 2. You can be a nice person, coming to a church every week and still not be a part of the church. Christ’s church is built on the bedrock of confessing faith.
- IV. Though that is the most basic definition of the institutional element of Christ’s church, did you notice the beautiful organic part of what Jesus said? “**I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.**” Jesus promises that those who are aligned by belief, confession, repentance, baptism, and discipleship will not in the end be disappointed! He has guaranteed the success of the church!
 - A. Think of all the kings, emperors, and philosophers⁶ over the last 2,000 years that have either predicted the demise of the church or actively tried to destroy it.
 - 1. How much blood has been spilled from the veins of faithful martyrs, while the sound of the gospel still thunders across creation, calling men and women to faith in Jesus?

2. But even so, I don't think Christ was primarily thinking about the defensive posture of the church when spoke of the guaranteed failure of the "gates of hell". He wasn't just saying that the church would survive persecution. Think about it. Gates are designed to keep enemies **out**, not hold them in!
- B. Jesus is inviting his church to go on **offense**; saying that as we fearlessly take the message of the cross to the culture, no power of hell or scheme of man has any defense or escape! Christ has promised victory to His obedient church!
1. For example, if you think the church is lethargic or dead, think again! It is estimated that the number of people claiming to be Christians increased by over 420 million between 2000-2015 worldwide⁷. God has been consistently adding to his church since the Day of Pentecost, and will continue to do so!
 2. Could one reason that the church seems so ineffective be that God's people here in the comfortable global west have forgotten that Jesus has promised the success of this enterprise called the church?
- V. So we see that the church is a believing and confessing community, armed with a guarantee of a triumphant outcome. Can we we guard the integrity of the institution? Do we have a role to play in that, or do we just "trust God" to do it?
- A. "I will give **you** the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." We talked about this a couple of weeks ago, but I believe (as do many Bible scholars⁸) that the keys of the kingdom refer to the church's responsibility "to officially affirm and oversee one another's membership in Jesus Christ and his kingdom" in the words of Jonathan Leeman.
1. Many people (especially ones raised Roman Catholic) might read these words as applied only to Peter, because that is who Jesus is addressing.
 2. But if we look just a couple of chapters over we will find a similar thought addressed to "the disciples"⁹, representing the entire church at that time.
- B. **Matthew 18:17 ESV** If he (**an unrepentant brother**) refuses to listen to them (**those pleading for him to repent**), tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. **18 Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.**
1. This inclusion of "the disciples" in the binding and loosing of the church's discipleship and discipline (meaning it was not just a special privilege set aside for Peter or the Apostles, because we're all disciples!) means that our connectedness and dependence on one another as a part of the body runs very deep!
 2. When we enter a covenant to be in membership or partnership with one another in the body of Christ, we become responsible "to officially affirm and oversee one another's membership in Jesus Christ and his kingdom". You look after me, and I look after you. We can no longer live detached, isolated lives; adamantly insisting that our lives are "no one's business but our own." We will talk much more about all of this next week.
- VI. **1 Corinthians 12:20 ESV** As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.**21** The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I

have no need of you.” **22** On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, **23** and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unrepresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, **24** which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, **25** that there may be no division in the body, but **that the members may have the same care for one another. 26 If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. 27** Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

- A. What an amazing way that Christ is represented in the part of the body called North Ridge Life Church! We are all different; we have different gifts and talents, different personalities, different strengths and weaknesses; but there is no hierarchy of important people here. You are all vital to this body!
1. I am speaking honestly and candidly when I say that the great joy of my life is being a part of the Body of Christ with you! I am completely aware of how much I need you. Many of you have guarded, encouraged, challenged and even corrected me, helped me, laughed with me and cried with me.
 2. I hope you can look around this room and feel the same way about those gathered here with you! If you can, I hope that you are increasingly grateful for the family that God has given you here. If you don't feel that way, however, I hope you'll come in from the edges of this fellowship, and get connected to some people who would love to share life with you!
- B. But the thing we must remember is that being a member, or covenant partner of this or any other church isn't about signing your name on a line, or voluntarily connecting with a few folks who are just like you. It's about recognizing that God has sovereignly placed you in a family; a tribe.
1. Now you don't have to live isolated and alone because we are united together; not by race, culture, economics, hobbies, etc., but because we have been united by Christ, in Christ!
 2. Paul, addressing the Gentile church at Ephesus, pointed out to them that though they were so different from their Jewish predecessors, God had done the amazing work of uniting them by the death and resurrection of Christ.
- C. **Ephesians 2:11 ESV** Therefore remember that at one time you Gentiles in the flesh, called “the uncircumcision” by what is called the circumcision, which is made in the flesh by hands— **12** remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. **13** But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. **14** For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility **15** by abolishing the law of commandments expressed in ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, **16** and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.
1. “He made us both one” we are now joined, not because of us, but because of him!

2. This is a big part of what we remember as we approach the table to partake of the Lord's Supper each week. We don't eat from different loaves and drink from different cups. No! We, together have come to remember and feast upon Jesus alone.

a) Not a white or black Jesus, a republican or democrat Jesus, a rich or poor Jesus; just Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away our sin.

b) And if that is what is uniting us, what on earth could possibly be important enough to divide us?

VII. **1 Corinthians 11:23 ESV** For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." **25** In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." **26** For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

¹ Leeman, Jonathan; *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus*; pg. 52; Wheaton IL, Crossway © 2012

² For this section, see Leeman, Jonathan; *Church Membership: How the World Knows Who Represents Jesus*; Chapter 3: What is a Church? What is a Church Member?; pp. 49-66; Wheaton IL, Crossway © 2012

³ *ibid*; pg 51

⁴ *ibid*; pg 51-52

⁵ Note on Matthew 16:13; *ESV Large Print Study Bible*; Pg. 1999; © 2008 Crossway

⁶ Nero, Vespasian, Voltaire, Mao Tse Tung, and others come to mind.

⁷ <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/ockenga/research/Quick-Facts-about-Global-Christianity.cfm>

⁸ *"They had no certain knowledge of the characters of men, and were liable to mistakes and sins in their own conduct; but they were kept from error in stating the way of acceptance and salvation, the rule of obedience, the believer's character and experience, and the final doom of unbelievers and hypocrites. In such matters their decision was right, and it was confirmed in heaven. But all pretensions of any man, either to absolve or retain men's sins, are blasphemous and absurd. None can forgive sins but God only. And this binding and loosing, in the common language of the Jews, signified to forbid and to allow, or to teach what is lawful or unlawful."* - Matthew Henry (<https://biblehub.com/commentaries/mhc/matthew/16.htm>); *"Whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth. The second metaphor, or comparison, is intended directly to point out the forgiveness of sins; for Christ, in delivering us, by his Gospel, from the condemnation of eternal death, looses the cords of the curse by which we are held bound. The doctrine of the Gospel is, therefore, declared to be appointed for loosing our bonds, that, being loosed on earth by the voice and testimony of men, we may be actually loosed in heaven. But as there are many who not only are guilty of wickedly rejecting the deliverance that is offered to them, but by their obstinacy bring down on themselves a heavier judgment, the power and authority to bind is likewise granted to the ministers of the Gospel."* -John Calvin (<http://www.biblestudyguide.org/ebooks/comment/calcom32.pdf>) *"Jesus gives his church "the keys of the kingdom of heaven," and according to Matthew 16:19, "whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." It is no small thing for a solid local church to find your profession of faith to be credible, and your lifestyle and conduct not disqualifying, and to accept you into membership."* -David Mathis (<https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/why-join-a-church>)...to name a very few.

⁹ Matthew 18:1