

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

By Ron Harvey

INTRODUCTION

Text: Matthew 16:18 *Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.*

We are Grace Baptist Church. We are a local church meeting here in Bartlett, Tennessee. We are a small church of about 30 families. But we are a church.

There are various images in the Bible to illustrate the church. The church is called a body, a bride, and family, a flock, a community and an army. And all of those images teach us about the church.

We have examples of local churches in the New Testament. We have the Jerusalem church and the church at Antioch and the various churches that Paul founded on his missionary journeys. And we can study those various churches to try to understand what a church is to be and what a church is to do.

We also have statements of Jesus which teach us things about the church. Jesus said, “I will build my church.” And he has been building it ever since.

Obviously, the church is to be a growing organism. Christ said, “I will build it.” That is, he will build it brick by brick until it is complete.

Most of us have been going to church for many years and we have some idea what a church is, but this morning we are going to look a little closer to make sure we understand that when the Bible speaks of the church, it is generally speaking of a local, visible church – just like Grace Baptist Church.

Now, in a previous message, we saw some of the purposes of the church. And in the next few weeks and months we want to continue to evaluate where we are going and what it is that we want to accomplish in our church so that we will ultimately fulfill the purpose that Christ has for us here.

We are going to see in our text this morning that Jesus said, “*I will build my church.*” And that implies a moving church and a growing church.

You see, if you are building something, it looks different on day two than it

did on day one. And on day 10 it is starting to look different indeed. Certainly it looks more complete.

And Jesus said, "*I will build my church.*"

In the next few weeks and months I want us formulate a picture about where we are going. What is the image we have for Grace Baptist Church? Now that we have our sanctuary nearing completion, I'm beginning to envision reaching out into this community and beginning to have visitors and new members.

I'm envisioning people in this community coming to our church and maybe hearing the true gospel for the first time and believing Christ. And then, we could use our new baptistery and see if it leaks.

I have always had a good feeling about this church. I can't really explain it. But I have a good feeling about it. Maybe it has something to do with the fact that I know our doctrine is good. Now that is foundational. I would rather have a church of 30 families with good doctrine than 300 families with bad doctrine, because with good doctrine, Jesus can build a great church.

But we also have a core of solid and godly men. I didn't say perfect, but I did say solid and godly. And where would we be without this handful of men who are willing to take responsibility and are willing to watch out for us.

And we have wonderful women who work behind the scenes and who also care about this church.

Maybe I have a good feeling about this church because I've seen the Lord's hand in virtually giving us this building and allowing us to easily sell our other building.

Maybe I have a good feeling about this church because we have shown a little vision and are stepping out in faith by building on to our present sanctuary.

But I get the sense that we are not complete by any means. But no church is ever complete in this world, because Jesus said, *I will build my church*. And his work of building the church won't be complete until the end of the world.

And you know what? I have a good feeling about the building of our church because I am confident we have a master builder.

Example: When we decided to build on to our sanctuary, we went out and found a general contractor. And ultimately, he is responsible for the building. He has subs and various workers who do work here and there, but it is the general contractor who is ultimately responsible.

And we have a general contractor who builds the spiritual church. And, I have a real good feeling about him. And if he says, *I will build my church*, I think all we have to do is believe him and be faithful. And then, we watch him build.

But this morning we want to identify what the Church is.

The Church is the greatest institution ever established in the history of the world. And well it should be because it was established by the Lord Jesus himself.

You will notice that our text says, “I will build my church.”

So, the church is an institution founded by Jesus.

He is the originator of the church. There was no church until Jesus came and established it during his ministry.

He is the owner of the church because he calls it “my” church.

This building is not our building, this pulpit is not our pulpit. But mainly, this body of believers that meets here each week belongs to Christ. We are his and we are lovely in his sight. We were given to him by the Father in election and Jesus is very determined to save us to the uttermost. And Jesus owns the church.

And our text says that he is the builder of the church. Now he may use us in his service in the building of the church, but it is Christ himself who builds it.

And Christ is many things to the church. If the church is viewed as a flock of sheep, then we find that he is the Shepherd of the church. If the church is pictured as a vineyard, then Christ is the husbandman or the caretaker of the vineyard. If the church is pictured as a bride, then Christ is the bridegroom. If the church is pictured as a body, then he is the head of the body.

You see, the church belongs to Christ. He is all in all to the church. It is established by him and for him. It is owned by him. And he builds the church. The church is his glory. It is his to have and to hold forever. And he loves his church.

No institution in the history of the world is like the church. It was founded specifically to represent Christ on this earth. It was to be the caretaker of the Word of God. The Bible says the church is the pillar and ground of the truth. (I Tim.3:15) And the church is equipped by Christ himself to propagate the teachings of Christ.

He gave the church apostles and prophets and evangelists and pastors to equip the church. It is principally through the church that the gospel is proclaimed throughout the world. Who would preach the gospel if it were not for the church? It is through the church that disciples are made in all nations.

The church is distinct from all other institutions because it is the institute of Christ himself and it is charged to do sacred work. The church is not a political body, although I am afraid some perceive themselves to be so. It is not principally a social organization. It is not a university. But the church is an institution, the only institution, authorized and created to carry out the ongoing spiritual work of Jesus Christ.

Now Jesus began his great redemptive work when he walked in Israel 2000 years ago. And he called his disciples and gathered a little church unto himself. And he taught them how to be fishers of men. And though the work of this small band of believers was limited in scope at first, Jesus envisioned a church that would spread far and wide.

Jesus' personal ministry on the earth lasted only about three years, but his work continued on after his death by his presence in the church.

The church is the only institution empowered by the very spirit of Christ. And for this reason it cannot fail. Other organizations may rise and fall, but Christ's church will prevail to the end. This is what Christ meant when he said,

The gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Now our text indicates several things which we will touch on very briefly this morning.

The first thing I would like for you to see from our text is that at least in some sense, the building of the church was future when Jesus spoke these words. He said, "I will build my church." Jesus was just beginning to build his church and the major construction of the church was still future. The church was in the beginning stages of construction. And of course, one of the first tasks in constructing a building is to lay the foundation.

And in this context, Jesus is speaking of himself as the Rock, upon which the church would be built. (v.18)

Example: Any time a builder begins a building project, it must begin with the foundation. There can be no building unless first the foundation is laid.

And therefore, when Jesus spoke these words, in AD 30, he was discussing the foundation of the church. And this foundation was the solid rock of his own person and work.

And he said, “Upon this rock I will build my church.”

And so, it appears that Jesus was laying the foundation and preparing to build his church. And in fact, his own work would be the foundation. And he himself would be the both the foundation and the chief cornerstone of the building.

And this church that Christ would build, would be something quite new – something different from any institution that ever existed before.

If you carefully consider the book of Acts, you must come to the conclusion that there was now, in the book of Acts, an institution that was never seen before. This was an institution that was not seen in the Old Testament and is wholly unique in the New Testament.

In the Old Testament, God’s people came from one nation, but in the New Testament, there is a new institution made up of Jews and Gentiles. In the Old Testament there was a temple where God presumably resided and met with the people. In the New Testament there is a new building being constructed and it is called the church. And the foundation of that building is Jesus himself.

The people of God in the Old Testament worshipped on the seventh day, and rightfully so, for this was God’s command to them. But we find that believers in the New Testament came together on the first day of the week. (Acts 20:7) And this indicates to me that New Testament believers were a part of a new institution – something different from the old economy, something quite unique.

And in the days when Jesus walked the earth, he said, ‘I will build my church.’”

So, the building of the church was substantially future when Christ spoke these words.

Now, there is some disagreement as to when the church first came into existence. Some say it was on the day of Pentecost when the Holy Spirit came and the apostles spoke in tongues and many were saved. But it says on that occasion that the Lord “added to them about 3,000 souls.” (Acts 2:41) And if he added to the church, then it appears the church was already in existence on the day of Pentecost.

Others say the origin of the church might be traced back to when Jesus called his first disciples, Simon and Andrew. And it seems this could be considered the first church. And when Jesus called his other disciples, the church grew in number. Now this first collection of disciples met every criteria of a New Testament church. They were believers, they were baptized by John the Baptist, they were called out from their former manner of lives to follow Christ, and they assembled together with Christ for worship and instruction. Jesus preached the gospel to them, they observed the Lord’s Supper, they had rules of church discipline, they had a treasurer and Christ was their head.

But whatever view we take of the origin of the church, it is clear that the earthly ministry of Jesus and the book of Acts was the mere infancy of the church and Christ told Peter, “I will build my church.” So, the church was essentially a future project at the time of Jesus.

Now the **second** point that I would like to make this morning is drawn from inference. And I would suggest to you that if the church originated when Jesus walked the earth and if it was a new institution founded by Jesus himself, then there is a difference between the family of God which includes all believers of all ages and the institution of the church which was founded by Christ during his earthly ministry.

You see, there is a family of God that includes all believers. Adam and Eve are in the family of God. Noah is in the family of God. Moses and Abraham and Isaac and Jacob are in the family of God. And David is in the family of God. And Elijah is in the family of God. And Steven and Paul and Timothy and all New Testament believers are in the family of God. But the family of God is not the same as the church because the church began in the days of Jesus.

Jesus founded the church in his day. And so, by definition, the church does not include those who came before. They were clearly in the family of God by faith, but they were not the church.

There was an earthly organization in the Old Testament called Israel. And there was a whole economy of worship that was established for Israel in the Old Testament. And their worship included things that prefigured Christ. They had priests and they had sacrifices and they had washings and purifications. And they had certain foods and certain religious days. And they rested and worshipped on the Sabbath day. But that wasn't the church. And that whole form of worship expired when Jesus came and established the church.

So, we should clearly see that the church began with the ministry of Jesus and is an institution that is different from Israel and distinct from the family of God.

Thirdly, from our text, notice that the church is in its essence an assembly of believers.

Now if we were all fluent in the Greek language and the Greek culture we would see very clearly that a church is an assembly. The Greek word translated church in this passage, is "ekklesia". And this was a common word used in the Greek language. Now it was not used exclusively of religious gatherings. But it was used of any gathering of people for any purpose.

Example: Israel was called an ekklesia when they were wandering in the wilderness. (Acts 7:38) But this wasn't because they were a part of the church later established by Christ. They were merely assembled together in the wilderness and so they were called an ekklesia.

Example: There were some unbelievers in Ephesus who gathered together in an amphitheatre to oppose Paul's teachings and Paul called them an ekklesia. (Acts 19:32) Now these people were worshippers of Dianna. Yet, Paul called them an ekklesia.

And the common usage of this Greek word "ekklesia" was to refer to an assembly. It could be an assembly of elected officials, it could be an assembly of riotous drunkards, or it could be an assembly of believers in Christ.

And this is what the church does - it assembles on a regular basis. And the very word translated church in the New Testament means assembly.

And this illustrates the very nature of the church. It is an assembly. And it appears that in order to have a church, there must be an assembly. The very word

that is translated church so many times in our Bibles, is the word ekklesia which means assembly.

Now when the word ekklesia is used in the New Testament, it usually refers to a local assembly. And it may say something like, “The ekklesia at Antioch or the ekklesia at Ephesus or the ekklesia at Corinth.” And it simply means the congregation – that group of people who assemble themselves on a regular basis and are organized for worship according to the rules and laws of Christ. This is by far the most prevalent meaning of the word ekklesia in the New Testament. It means a local assembly. And really, there is no question about this because the context almost always makes it clear that it is talking about a local assembly.

Acts 8:1

Acts 13:1

Romans 16:1

Romans 16:5

I Cor.1:2

I Cor.4:17

I Cor.16:19

But, there are a few times when the word ekklesia is used not in the sense of a local assembly but in the sense of the institution itself.

So, if the Bible speaks of the church, without designating which local assembly, it may be speaking of the church as an institution.

Example: If someone said, “Our problems today are due to a breakdown of the family,” it is clear that he is not talking about any particular family, but he is talking about the family as an institution.

Example: If someone said, “Our problems today are due to a breakdown of marriage,” it is clear that he is not talking about any particular marriage, but he is talking about marriage as an institution.

And sometimes the Bible talks about the Church not as a local assembly but as an institution. When it refers to the Church without specifying which Church, it is likely speaking of that grand institution which Christ established and which is guided by his rules and regulations.

When it says, “The Church,” it does not mean the family of God, because that is a different entity altogether as we have already shown. But it does mean the institution of the Church. But this is by far the least of its uses in the Bible.

So, we believe that the church is both a grand institution established by Christ and built by Christ and primarily a local, visible assembly of believers.

And so, **fourthly**, we resist the idea that the church is some universal, invisible entity that consists of all believers. A believer is a part of the family of God for sure, but he is not a member of the church until he unites with a local assembly under the proper administration of the ordinances and a healthy preaching of the Word of God.

Now, it is the responsibility of every believer to associate himself with other believers in a true church and to assemble regularly. And it is clear that not just any religious association will be considered a church. The Salvation Army is not a church. The YMCA is not a church. A religious seminar is not a church. I think we would all agree, there are some essentials which must be present to constitute a true church.

There must be the proper preaching and teaching of the Word of God for there to be a true church. And I would say that the preaching of the Word of God is at the core of a true church. It is the principal activity of a true church. And that seems obvious. But there are countless churches that have long given up on this essential task. And they have resorted to programs and entertainment and social functions and psychology and self-improvement plans and marriage training to keep the church rolls full. And the Word of God is barely addressed at all. But the preaching of the Word is at the core of a true church and where there is no true preaching of the Word, there is no true church.

There must be the proper administration of the ordinances. There are only two ordinances authorized by Jesus for his church – Baptism and The Lord’s Supper. And a true church must perform these ordinances regularly and properly.

When it comes to baptism, we believe that a true church baptizes only those who profess faith in Christ. A person believes in the Lord Jesus Christ - then he is baptized as a sign of his union with Christ. And this is a function of the church – to baptize those who believe.

Then they that gladly received his word were baptized.

Acts 2:41

What about an organization that baptizes unregenerate persons? Can such an organization be considered a true church? There are organizations that baptize infants and declare by such baptism that the infant is a member of the church - a member of the body of Christ. And this is so clearly unscriptural as to render the organization something less than a true church. We don't deny that there are many saved people in these organizations, but we deny that they are functioning as a true church.

The Roman Catholic Church is an example of a religious organization that has so distorted the Word of God in so many ways that they can't be called a true church. Are there saved persons belonging to the Roman Church? Probably. Is the Roman Catholic Church a true church? No.

So, we believe, to be a true church there must at a minimum be true preaching of the Word of God and faithful and proper observance of the ordinances.

Let me conclude this morning by summarizing the message:

1. The church was originated by Christ during his earthly ministry and the building of the church was future. Jesus said, "I will build my church."

Now this means that Old Testament saints were not a part of the church and so:

2. The church is something different from the family of God. There is a family of God consisting of all believers of all time, but this is not the church and should not be equated to the church.

3. The church is an ekklesia which word is by definition and common Greek usage, an assembly. If there is no assembling, then there is no ekklesia.

4. The concept of a universal, invisible church fails at this point because it is impossible for a universal, invisible church to assemble. The church is not defined as all those who are saved, but rather, all those believers who assemble together. And this is by necessity a local church.