

## What Is The Church?

August 27, 2023  
Pastor Matthew Ude  
INI - SDG

**Matthew 16:13-20** <sup>13</sup> When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" <sup>14</sup> So they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." <sup>15</sup> He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" <sup>16</sup> Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." <sup>17</sup> Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven. <sup>18</sup> "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. <sup>19</sup> "And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed<sup>1</sup> in heaven." <sup>20</sup> Then He commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ.

"On this rock I will build my church."

The meaning of this passage is one that has been in contention for over 500 years since the beginning of the Lutheran church. The Catholics have always insisted that "this rock" refers to Peter and that therefore Christ's church is those who follow the one they consider to be Peter's successor, namely the Roman Pope. Although their conclusions about this passage are very much wrong, they are nevertheless correct that Jesus in these verses discusses the very essence of what the Church is.

We don't need to get into a detailed discussion of the many arguments over this passage, but we do need a reminder of the very essence of what the church is and who we are in Christ and why we are Christ's.

The Church is:

those who confess Christ.  
those who use the keys.  
those who escape death.

### **The Church is those who confess Christ.**

By confession here we do not mean solely that which is spoken by the mouth, but rather that which is in the heart and because it is in the heart it is expressed not only in word but in deed and attitude as well.

Paul speaks in Romans 10:10

**Romans 10:10-11** For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation. For the Scripture says, "Whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame."

In these verses he is not expressing two separate ideas but in poetic fashion he is expressing the same idea twice. The faith which is in the heart and because it is in the heart it is expressed with the mouth,

that is what we mean by confession in this context. That is what we hear from Peter in our text. He confesses with his mouth that which is in his heart, that Jesus is the Christ. This is what Jesus is speaking about when he says, "on this rock I will build my church."

Christ does not say "on you will I build my church," speaking of Peter, but rather he says on "this" speaking of the truth of Peter's confession. There is much in this passage which makes it clear Jesus is speaking of the confession "You are the Christ" not the person Peter. One could get into a discussion of the Greek terms used, Petros and Petra. We could discuss the use of pronouns. But more than this, all of scripture testifies to the fact that God does not build his church on any one human other than Christ but rather that all who confess that Jesus is the Son of God are his people.

Abraham confessed faith in God when he willingly sacrificed his own son, and the scriptures witness that:

**Galatians 3:6-8** 6 just as Abraham "believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness." Therefore know that only those who are of faith are sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, "In you all the nations shall be blessed."

They are not the church of God who are Abraham's children by the flesh. Rather they are of the Church who confess the same faith as Abraham.

David when he had committed murder and adultery, confessed faith by admitting his sin and pleading for God's mercy, and with this confession was granted forgiveness and a place among God's people.

**2 Samuel 12:13** 13 So David said to Nathan, "I have sinned against the LORD." And Nathan said to David, "The LORD also has put away your sin; you shall not die."

Job when he was tormented, confessed this same faith proclaiming, "I know that my redeemer lives."

The man who was born blind even though he did not even know Jesus' name, nevertheless stood firm with the confession, "He has opened my eyes." **John 9:30**

As Jesus reminds Peter in our text this is not a confession from men. This is the confession which God spoke from heaven when he confessed that the seed of the woman would crush the head of Satan. Ever since then faithful men have repeated this confession, and on that confession the church has been built.

Repeatedly they are called God's people who by faith and confession of that faith stand firm on Christ. There is no other foundation upon which Christ's church is built. Therefore, all those who stand on Christ and confess with Peter "**You are the Christ,**" are standing on the rock which is Christ. They are the children of God. They are the church of God.

This is what makes one of the Church, one of God's people. It is not being called a Lutheran, or a catholic, or a Baptist which makes one of God's people. It is not voting republican which makes one of God' people. "**Whoever believes on Him.**" They are of the church who confess with their heart, i.e. have faith, that Jesus is the Christ.

**The Church is those who use the keys.**

To these people Christ has given the keys to his house.

When you are a stranger, you must knock at a house and ask to be let in. If the house is your parents' house, you don't need to knock, you may even have keys or at least know where the spare key is hidden. In fact, I don't usually even knock at my wife's parents' house anymore. That is how I scared them once. They didn't know I was coming and were rather concerned about who had just entered their house.

Jesus reminds us in our text, to us who are the sons of God there is no need to knock at the gates of heaven. We have been given the keys and not only can we go in and out, but also we can let others in or lock others out.

In our text Jesus is speaking to Peter. The pronoun "you" is singular, to you Peter I give the keys. However, there are other passages that make it clear that it is not only Peter, but all his disciples.

**John 20:22-23 And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained."**

This wasn't just Peter. It wasn't even just the apostles. The Emmaus disciples were there. The women were probably there, and others as well. To all of them, to us as well Jesus gives the keys. With the faith which Peter confesses in our text, comes the gift of the keys.

But the possession of these keys is not only a gift but also a responsibility. We fail in our duty as sons of God when we are slow to unlock, that is to forgive, the penitent. We fail in our duty as sons of God when we are slow to lock, that is warn, the impenitent.

This confession of forgiveness through Jesus Christ is the foundation of the church. We become members through faith in this confession. If the members of a church are not willing to forgive and share Christ's forgiveness the church will not grow. If the church is not willing to preach the law and warn those who are impenitent the church will decay.

It is our greatest joy to unlock the doors of heaven to those who are repentant, but it is also our solemn duty to lock the doors to those who will not repent of their sin. We do not lock the doors because someone has sinned, but only if they refuse to repent.

Almost every week I stop by Arleen Thiem's house to drop off a DVD of the service. Last week Todd was there mowing the lawn. Other times Dan has been there. Occasionally one of Arleen's daughters is in the house with her. I imagine they probably all have keys to the house, perhaps not, but they all clearly come and go to help their mom, because they are all her children.

As sons of God Christ has given to all of us the keys to the kingdom that we may all use them in the diligent care of His house, the church, which are the people of God.

We are the children of God through that confession of faith because Christ died for our sins. As children we each hold the keys so that we can all work together.

**Church is those who have victory over death.**

"The gates of hell will not prevail against it."

Jesus does not here speak of armies or weapons. He does not say the strength of Satan or the armies of hell, but he says gates. Who wants the gates destroyed? Only those who are seeking to get in against the will of the city, or those who are trapped inside and want to get out.

We have no desire to enter Hades therefore it is clear that Jesus is speaking to us as those who are trapped inside of death and desire to get out. He himself entered death and the gates of death could not keep him inside. He arose and lives forever. Likewise, those who join, Peter, Abraham, David and others in this confession "You are the Christ" cannot be kept in by death. The gates are broken and through Christ's forgiveness we freely walk out.

At the sound of the horn the walls of Jericho fell. At the sound of this confession which Peter utters in our text but which we all join in confessing the walls of death crumble and life is ours through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen