

## Who or What is the Church?

*Matthew 16:13-18*

- I. Who or what is the church?
  - A. “What”—a word that specifies a thing or things.
  - B. “Who”—a word that usually refers to a person or persons.
  - C. Many/*most* think church is a “what”—a building, a meeting, an event
  - D. The church is a “who”—a spiritual organism.
    1. Romans 16:5; Ephesians 1:22-23.
- II. Four essential questions for the church (from life’s biggest questions for all time).
  - A. Who is the church?
  - B. Why is the church here?
  - C. What is the church to do?
  - D. Where is the church going?
- III. The church and erosion.
  - A. Erosion—“to diminish or destroy by degrees, to eat into or away by slow destruction of substance.”
    1. C.S. Lewis “*Indeed the safest road to hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts*”.
    2. A warning to the church 30-50 years ago—erosion.
    3. Today—the tragic results of spiritual erosion—a spiritual Grand Canyon.
- IV. Being the church God wants us to be.
  - A. Hermeneutical principle—To understand a topic or a term, begin with the *passage of primary reference*. Regarding the word “church”, go back to the very first place it is mentioned in the Bible.
    1. Matthew 16:13-18
  - B. Context—Jesus is teaching and training the disciples for their ministry after He departs (the cross). They are in “neutral” Caesarea Philippi.
  - C. Life’s ULTIMATE question—“*Who do you say Jesus Christ is?*”

1. It is vital to know *who* Jesus is to understand what He has done.
2. Peter's answer (Verse 16).
  - a. *You are the Christ*—the Messiah.
  - b. *You are the Son of the Living God*.
3. Peter's answer becomes the foundation for the church (NOT Peter himself!).
  - a. Peter received that truth not by man but by revelation from God.
 

*-- To know Jesus rightly is a gift from God...*
4. Peter's name changed from Simon to "Cephas" (Aramaic) translated "Peter" ("stone") after his proclamation of who Jesus is. (Dan's view).
5. The rock the church is built upon is the testimony and reality of WHO **Jesus** is.

V. Jesus—"I will build My church"

- A. The church is indestructible!
  1. Hades= death : death and hell cannot have victory over the church.
- B. Four **not** insignificant monosyllabic words:
  1. **"I"**—Jesus is the designer, architect, builder of the church—not us!
  2. **"Will"**—The future (near).
  3. **"Build"**—It has a starting point and will continue on being built.
  4. **"My"**—It is Jesus's church! Colossians 1:15 - 1:18
- C. *"Ekklesia"*—from the compound Greek words *Ek* = out from; *Kaleo* = to call. The called out ones—those who answer the ultimate question—Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

***Jesus MUST remain the center of the church—the head***

## Who or What is the Church?

*Matthew 16:13-18 Acts 2:41-47*

A little different this morning...kind of a “*can we talk*” message... also different in that it may be shorter than usual! AMEN?...no promises... I set out to begin to answer the question “*Who or What is the Church*”... and do so by looking at two crucial passages in the New Testament to begin the answer... Matthew 16 and Acts 2.

By the end of this week it became apparent that I would need more time than the average person can sit through to cover all that... so I decided to only look at Matthew 16 which ended up being a little shorter than my average sermon...I expect no complaints!

“*Who or what is the church?*”...why didn’t I just say “*What is the church?*”... I presented two options because “who” means something completely different than “what”...and I think there is a big misunderstanding by many regarding church...to many church is a “what”.

“*What*”...according to the third definition of “*What*” by Webster... is a word that specifies something...a thing or things... something physical... an object, a place... where “who” is usually a person or persons... something organic...something God created.

It’s easy to see why we would think the church as a “what”... Many if not most people today understand the church to be a building... *what is the church?*... it’s a building... 711 Fairview drive... There’s another one over there on Mountainview, two or three on 6<sup>th</sup> Street... in fact there are 37 churches in Moscow, Idaho....37 different buildings.

When asked *where do you go to church?*... all of us usually identify a building... a “where” which goes along with “what”...a what has a where... People ask us questions like *when does your church start?*... we answer *10:30 and hopefully it is over by 12:00 noon*...

It’s a “what” that includes an event... that has a start and an end time... and people shop for this building and the event... in hopes to find something *they like* ...does it start at a convenient time?... does it go too long?... is the music any good?...is the speaker interesting?...are the people friendly? Do they serve good coffee?...I know I’m being a little flippant.

But I am guilty myself... I know better.. but when people ask me where I *go* to church I tell them 711 Fairview Drive it starts at 10:30... over .... *Around noon*... I won’t comment about the speakers...*but you should come!*

You *come* to a *place*...you *go* there...

I think it is sad when churches decline... attendance wains, people have been leaving, often the solution is a new better building... just a week ago I had this discussion with a member of another church... she said the church isn’t doing great, it’s not necessarily dying but it isn’t

growing either... it's hanging on...there's plenty of empty seats... *But on Sunday we're going to vote on building a new WHAT?... we're going to build a new church.*

Embracing the philosophy of that now old 1989 movie *Field of Dreams*, “**If you build it....they will come!**...we've built a lot of church buildings.

**The church is not a building**... it is a people... it is a “who”... Paul writes in Romans 16:5 **Greet the church** (you don't greet a building) **that is in their house**...the church is IN a building...the church was not the building... the building was the home of Prisca and Aquila's... the church was the body of believers WHO met in the house....[so it's ok to tell everyone where the church MEETS 711 Fairview Drive!] I went into making this distinction because

When we think the church is a “what” we begin thinking about the church in human terms... it becomes a place, an institution, a commodity... a physical entity that relies on human ingenuity to make it work...human effort to make it thrive...to make it grow...**but the church is not something WE build.**

Something I have to remind myself continuously....in that the church is a who... as we will be reminded of this morning that the church is all the redeemed in Christ... all the people who have accepted Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior... is the church.

[it's really ridiculous when someone says *I'm a Christian but I don't have anything to do with the church!*... You are the church!]

The apostle Paul defines it clearly in Ephesians 1:22-23 **And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and made Him head over all things to the church, 23 which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.**

We'll unpack that at a later time... for now know that when you become a Christian you become a part of Christ's body...the church...in effect... the church is a spiritual organism made up of Christ and His redeemed.

In that the church is people... there is a close relationship in you and your life and the life of the church... What applies to our lives applies often to the church...Our lives are intimately intermeshed with the church...

So intermeshed that what happens in your life effects the church... when you hurt, the church hurts with you... when you cop an attitude, it affects the church... when you sin it affects the church... when you are celebrating, when you are joyful, when you are having difficulties... it affects the church.

On occasion I've mentioned the classic *four biggest questions in life* I think everyone should ask themselves...and come up with answers... anybody who is a “who”:

1. Who am I?
2. Why am I here?

3. What am I to do?
4. Where am I going?

As a Christian, I might answer these like:

**Who am I?** — A person created in God's image, loved by Him, yet in need of His grace.

**Why am I here?** — To know, love, worship, and glorify God while loving and serving others.

**What am I to do?** — Follow Jesus, grow in holiness, love my neighbor, and faithfully use my life for God's purposes.

**Where am I going?** — Toward eternal life with God through Jesus Christ, with the hope of the resurrection and the renewal of creation.

In that the church is not a what but a who... these same four questions should be asked of the church... *Who is the church?... why Is the church here?... What is the church to do?... Where is the church going?*

For the month of July I want to try to answer those questions... the reason for this is that I want us all to be on the same page when it comes to “church”... the church in the world is a mess... it is a mess because in these days... the church has been defined, operated and sustained by man...

Back in the 1990's I heard a message on the church which included a severe warning about “erosion” in the church...the preacher (Chuck Swindoll) warned about a deadly spiritual erosion becoming apparent within the church... He later wrote a book called *The Church Awakening*. Calling for the church to “wake up” from this deadly spiritual erosion

The definition of “erosion” is *to diminish or destroy by degrees... to eat into or away by slow destruction of substance....*He writes *Rather than occurring rapidly, erosion is always slow. Instead of drawing attention to itself, erosion is always silent. And in place of being obvious, erosion is always subtle...*

C.S. Lewis echoed this in his *The Screwtape Letters* he wrote *Indeed the safest road to hell is the gradual one—the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts...*

You see... erosion is so slow... so unnoticeable...he slips on by undetected...there are no sudden turnings to wake us up... just a gentle slope, so gentle we don't even realize we're traveling down hill....

Milestones?... a stone set up beside a road to mark the distance in miles to a particular place....Milestones are important for two reasons...1. They can reveal how far you've come... a good thing.... Or 2. How far you've drifted from your desired destination... Lewis suggests that drifting is easy and certain if there are no milestones.

Well... spiritual erosion was a warning back in the 90's...35 or so years ago... I think it is obvious now the church did not heed the warning... what has eroded is now obvious... the grand canyon of the church is now formed...

The *Center for the Study of Global Christianity* determined that there are over 45,000 worldwide Christian denominations...I've always maintained that the reason there are denominations is because every denomination represents a big bloody fight in a church... why are there 45,000 of them?... Massive spiritual erosion has undermined the very biblical foundations the church was to be built upon... compromise... pragmatism... egos.... Plain sin...

Now... I don't want to talk about this...it depresses me... I want to talk about this church... our church... what God wants us to be... get us all on the same page...I don't want us to be a casualty of spiritual drift.... So I want us to all have a clear understanding of what God wants His church to be and be it!

Are you on board?

One important rule of biblical interpretation (Hermeneutics) is whenever you want to understand a topic or term such as *church*...we should begin at what is known as *the passage of primary reference*... what that means concerning a biblical study of the church is to go back to the very first time the term "church" is used in Scripture.

Where in the Bible is the word "church" first mentioned?... and in what context is it used?... this will lead us to the answer "who is the church?"...The term church... the word church was not first used by the apostle Paul... or Peter... or John that coined the term "church"... It was Jesus Himself...

Turn in your Bibles to Matthew 16...Most of you are familiar with this passage, I think it is a good thing to revisit it periodically...It is a very clear and vital passage for us to get the church right...

### **Read Matthew 16:13-18**

Jesus had been training His disciples for many months... teaching them all about His world... a world foreign to the world they had been living...

They walked with Jesus... watched Him... observed Him doing miracles... how He did ministry... how He loved people... they were being taught His ways... Jesus knew His ministry was fast approaching the end... and there was much He needed to teach them.... His enemies were multiplying... He knew they were plotting to take His life.

So Jesus takes His disciples away from the Sea of Galilee north to a region around the very source of the Jordan River known as Caesarea Philippi... for the most part a non-Jewish city... this would be a quiet retreat where Jesus could safely spend some quality time with His disciples...

Not to be confused with Caesarea, Herod's coastal port city... [beautiful city!]... Caesarea Philippi was near the base of Mt. Hermon in northern Israel near the border of today's Lebanon.....It is here that Jesus asks His disciples a question... I mentioned *Life's four biggest questions*... but there is one more question... this would be *life's ultimate question*...

How one answers THIS question will have everything to do with one's eternal destiny!...

### **Read 16:13**

Every town that Jesus and the disciples went to...after witnessing miracles and amazing teaching... would be all a buzz regarding Jesus...they had never seen anyone like Jesus...So Jesus wanted to know *What was the word on the street?... what have you guys been hearing from the townspeople?...*

I don't think Jesus really cared all that much what the people were saying...I think He was setting up the question for His disciples to answer... I think it was a way to bring the subject up with His disciples...

### **Read verse 14**

I never thought about this before, but each one of those options required someone to come back from the dead!... or in the case of Elijah, he would have had to return from his ascent to heaven... so they saw Jesus as supernatural.... But they failed to identify Him as Messiah.

But here is the question Jesus was setting up:

### **Read verse 15**

The "YOU" is plural and in the original Greek text is at the beginning of the verse... **But YOU, who do YOU say that I am?...**Jesus is emphasizing the YOU... YOU!! It's so plural I think it includes all of us!... it truly is the ultimate question each one of us must answer in this lifetime. If you get the answer wrong... NOTHING else in the world matters!

Who do you say Jesus is?

Jesus wants His disciples (and us) to know **for sure who He is**... without a right understanding of WHO Jesus is, there can't be a right understanding for what He has done...and what He means to us and the world.... so... I think the disciples heard the question and all eyes were on Jesus.

Surprise... it is Peter who steps up and answers the question!

### **Read verse 16**

This is a huge answer... most of my commentators think that Peter answers that question without fully understanding his answer!...

***You are the Christ...*** Greek = Christos which is a translation of the Hebrew word *Mashiach* translated to the English, *Messiah*...*The anointed One*... In the Old Testament they would have an anointing ceremony to consecrate prophets, priests and kings... they would pour olive oil over their heads... Jesus was the ultimate prophet, priest, king... He was the Messiah... and that's what Peter confirmed....but Peter doesn't stop there,,,

Peter says to Jesus **You are the Son of the Living God...** "You are the *real* God"...the One that is alive!...He's in effect putting Jesus alongside the little "g" gods of Rome and concludes that Jesus is not one of those dead false gods....

Pleased with his answer...Jesus gives Peter a blessing:

### **Read verse 17**

That's profound...What Peter said...was truth he received NOT by man... but was given to him by divine revelation... by God Himself... earlier Jesus said in 11:27 **All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.**

One said *To know Jesus rightly is a gift from God...*

Peter may not have fully realized what his answer meant... you are the Christ... you are the Son of God... but what he knew was revealed to Him supernaturally... remember all of that...it's related to what follows.

### **Read verse 18**

The first meeting of Jesus and Peter is recorded in John 1:42...Jesus said to then *Simon*... **You are Simon the Son of John** (18:17 *You are Simon son of Bar-Jonah*): **you shall** be (better will be in the future) **called Cephas, which is translated Peter**...You ARE Simon... that was "now"... but in the future you *will be called* Cephas which is Aramaic... in Greek it would be Peter...

When is that future date he will be called "Cephas/Peter?... well...I think right here in Matthew 16:18 he is Peter...I think this is important... Peter just proclaimed Jesus as the Christ, Son of God... he has become what he was meant to be...the possessor... the proclaimer of the foundation stone of the Christian faith...NOT the foundation stone of the church...

But his answer to that ultimate question....that profession of faith becomes the foundation stone of the Christian church.... **You are the Christ, the Son of the living God! THAT IS THE FOUNDATION ROCK.**

What Jesus says to Peter is a bit nuanced... a little play on words.... **You are Peter, ...Peter is Petros**...a stone, a small rock... **and upon this rock...Petra**...A large rock...not a stone...but bedrock... **I will build My church.**

Not... *on you Peter will I build My church...* but little stone Peter, what you professed.... How you answered the question **who do you say that I am...** that answer will be the foundation rock of My church!

[I went into the whole Peter story because it shows us the foundation of the church...it's not us building a building... its not us putting on a program....it is a confession of Jesus Christ as the Son of God...]

That's not all... Jesus tells us He will build His church **and the gates of Hades will not overpower it...** when we went through Revelation we talked about Hades... remember?... *Hades* is the Hebrew... *Sheol* is the Greek...it is the place of the dead... In Isaiah 38:10 Isaiah writes quoting Hezekiah... **In the middle of my life I am to enter the gates of Sheol: I am deprived of the rest of my years...** *I'm going to die early.*

So what Jesus is saying is ***Nothing will stop the building of My church—not even the powers of death and hell.*** The church is indestructible!!

Along with that are **four not insignificant monosyllabic words**...let's look at them:

1. Jesus said **“I” will build My church...** “I”... Jesus is the architect... Jesus is the builder... He is the originator of the church... it is His idea!...He makes it happen!...

Do you know how freeing that is?... it sure is for me!...When I first became the pastor of Trinity some 22, 23 years ago... I was so concerned that I would blow it...I was horrified at the thought of everyone finding out just how inept I was (and am still!). . When the attendance dropped in the summer I thought I'd better do something about it! *What am I doing wrong?*

As if you bring in a pastor to build the church!

[I've shared this before in a different context... but its relevant here... The SBC was recognizing “erosion” in the SBC churches... many churches were closing their doors... some panic set in the convention... ***we've got to do something!***...now, this is maybe 18 years ago...

This building was a couple of years old... cutting edge I might add! But word had circulated through the SBC that we just might be a super church or something in Moscow, Idaho... at least had the potential.... If we can just do something with the pastor... cool church... not so cool pastor...

So they selected about 20 potential cool pastors in the Pacific Northwest to attend five sessions over five months led by a cool pastor in Portland Oregon. He was the “lead” pastor over five satellite churches all in the Portland area... this is a NON-SBC church that was busting at the seams with people...

- Comes out on stage, my age, but...shaved head, skinny jeans, holy Tee shirt, flip flops.
- “Look at you guys!”
- You preach too long

- You're probably boring
- You need to build sets and have videos in your sermons
- THAT'S how you build your church!

By the way... we never made it to the fifth session...I'll leave out the details but the five churches no longer exist.

A pastor might be able to fill up auditoriums with clever talks and good coffee but he can't build the church!... Only Jesus can do that.. THAT is why I am so thankful for Matthew 16:18 being in my Bible back in 2002!

Now... just to say... you can think wearing three piece black suits, head coverings on the women and sing only from the Psalter is going to build the church...only Jesus Christ can and will build His church.

2. I **"will" build My church**...it's the future... He didn't build it when He said these words... it was a promise for the future...the very near future....think about this... when Jesus said these words to His disciples... they had no idea what a church was!

3. I **will build My church**... "build"...suggesting not only will there be a beginning... but this tense of the word suggest it will be an ongoing process... the church will begin at a certain point then grow...and grow... and grow.... And keep on growing!

4. **"My" ... I will build My church**... it is His!... *what church do you go to?*...Jesus's church!...He is the owner.... He is the authority...He is the head!

COLOSSIANS 1:15 - 1:18

**15 Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.**

**16 For in Him all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him.**

**17 And He is before all things, And in Him all things hold together.**

**18 And He is the head of the body, the church; Who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.**

We MUST keep this at the forefront of our minds regarding the church and us.... We should keep asking ourselves... Is Christ the Head of our church?... Does He have first place in our ministry? Is what we do here all about Jesus?... or are we drifting down the gentle slope of erosion?

**Is all this about Him?...**

I said the disciples never had heard the term church before this...what they heard was the Greek word *Ekklesia*...from two words "*Ek*" means "out from"... "*Kaleo*" means "to call"... the idea *to be called out from the others*...

What makes this word special is that it is attached to “My”... “Mine, who I have called out from the others”... who are these He calls out?... those who answer the question **Who do you say that I am with the Christ, Son of the Living God!**

The church is a body... yes... a body of believers...not a building...not a piece of real estate... not a weekly event...this is a body...listen to this “The Church Awakening”: *this body is without political roots, it is without cultural boundaries, it is without linguistic restrictions, it is apart from racial barriers, it has no denominational ties, it is not a business establishment with a cross stuck onto it, it is a spiritual entity...it is not a corporation... the church that Jesus Christ is building is a spiritual entity... the state does not and cannot dictate our ways... we do not listen to the state to get our message, we do not wait for the state to give us its approval...we stand separate from and apart from the state... the nation...the church is a spiritual entity.*

*Christ remains the head...NOT the congregation, NOT majority vote, not any man woman or family, not a pastor or a board, Christ alone is the head of the church.*

Why is all that so important?... because the tendency of every person is to call upon anything and everything BUT Christ and His Word... why has the church eroded?... why has it turned into a great grand canyon?... because slowly... inch by inch... Christ has been taken off the throne...

He has been replaced in so many “churches” by politics....social concerns... personal interests... wisdom of man and mans efforts...man’s ambitions....

I want us to take away at least three things this morning as we began our quest to answer the four biggest questions for the church.

1. **The church is a “who” not a “what”**—a spiritual organism...all who are redeemed in Christ are joined to the body of Christ...His church. when we embrace that truth it affects all that we do when we meet together as the church.
2. **The church is Jesus Christ’s—He designed it, He built it and is building it, He owns it.**
3. **The church will be victorious**
4. **Christ is to be center of the church.**