

What is church and why does it matter?

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[0:00] So, I'm delighted to welcome all of you to this church, especially if it's your first time. Just saying the word church is interesting because I feel like the word church is a loaded word these days. Maybe it always was, but the word church tends to conjure lots of associations. When I'm out and about and people ask what I do and they find out I work for a church, it always provokes lots of interesting responses. And that's because I think the word church, I think the word church kind of has powerful emotional associations for people one way or another. Some people hear the word church and it immediately conjures sense of warmth and belonging and connection. They think of their church home, people who love them and invested in them, and some of you have that experience and and praise God. I hope everybody in our church has those memories looking back. But I can be sure that you know as well as I do, there are lots of people out there with very different associations. People, when they hear the word church, they immediately think of disappointment or they think of pain or they associate church with scandal or abuses of power, leaders falling from grace, grace, stories that we've read about in the news or things that you've experienced personally.

And because of that, I think it's more and more common for people to have the sentiment that, you know, if I want to have a relationship with God, if I want to follow Jesus, why do I need the church for that? The church has only ever brought me frustration and disappointment and hurt. Why would I go back? Why would I go to the trouble to be involved? Why get up on a Sunday? Why sign up to do things? When I can download sermons at home, when I can read my Bible, when I can pray, when I can do all that on my own time and my own schedule, why church? So, we're here this morning to ask, what would Jesus say in response to these questions? Not just pastors, people who work for the church, but what would Jesus say? We're going to look at Matthew chapter 16 this morning. This is in our lectionary reading, so we come to this passage providentially. I think it speaks to a lot of these questions. This is a conversation between Jesus and His disciples where He, for the first time in this gospel, uses the word church. He's teaching them about church. And so, we're going to see what according to Jesus is church and why does it matter? Why does it matter to us? Or should it matter to us? And we're going to see that church is more than just one thing. You know, if you look at this passage, we can sort of think of three words to describe church. Church is, of course, a community.

Church is not just a community. It's also an institution. And then on top of that, it's not just a community or an institution. It's also a movement. So, please join me in prayer and then we will open God's word together. Let's pray. Our Lord, Heavenly Father, thank You for not only the fact that You've given us the freedom to gather here, but thank You first and foremost for Your presence here. You're the one we seek to hear from this morning. It's Your voice. It's Your presence that we seek and most need. We pray that, Lord, as we open Your written word, we would encounter the living word, that we would come to a deeper understanding of who You are and what Your desire is for us, and what it means how we might glorify You. We pray this in Your Son's name. Amen.

So, the first thing that we're going to see as we open this passage together is that the church is a community, which shouldn't be a surprise to many of us. It's a community of faith, a community of faith in Jesus as the Messiah. In Matthew chapter 16, verse 13, we're told that Jesus comes into the region of Caesarea Philippi. And this is a place where there's a lot of confusion at this point in the gospel around Jesus' identity. Who is He really? And so, He asks His disciples, who do people say the Son of Man is? And I want you to notice that right off the bat, Jesus begins His teaching on the church by asking a question about His identity. So, there's a connection between what we believe about Jesus' identity and the church. So, the disciples say, well, some say He's one of the prophets, and they name a few of the prophets, and they represent traditions of expectations around what

God was going to do to save and rescue His people. And they say, well, some say that He's one of the prophets. And I think many people today would say something similar. Yeah, you know, I think Jesus was probably real. Most scholars agree that He was real, and He was more than likely just a great man, a great prophet, a social reformer.

[4:58] Then Jesus asks the real question, but what about you? Who do you say that I am? And Peter answers on behalf of the disciples, right? He's asking all of the disciples. It's a plural you.

Peter, as the representative, answers. And He says, you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God, the Messiah, the ultimate prophet, priest, and king, the one we've been waiting for. And Jesus responds, blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. This is the answer that He was looking for. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church. Now, a lot of ink has been spilled over this verse.

And there's a lot of disagreement over what exactly Jesus means here when He says this back to Peter. We really obviously don't have time for a full deep dive into this discussion.

But after praying about this a bit, I decided it would be worth addressing briefly for this reason, because in our church, a lot of us, a number of you come out of a Catholic background, and that there's going to... a Roman Catholic background, and you're going to have a different way of reading this. Some of you come from very other... you know, on the other end of the spectrum, and maybe you've never even thought about what this means, or maybe you've never even looked at this verse closely.

A number of you go to Roman Catholic school. You're going to be starting this week. And so, this is one of those areas of difference that is meaningful and significant, and it helps us understand some of the differences between Roman Catholics and Protestants and the Eastern Orthodox Church and various groups. And so, I think it's worth spending a little time on. But I do want to say, you know, as a principal in this church, we don't normally talk about other Christians, and when we do, we like to focus on the things that we agree on. So, this is a bit of an exception.

[7:02] And if you're sitting here thinking, you know, this has nothing to do with me, bear with me, and hopefully I'll make it clear in a few minutes why this matters. The Roman Catholic Church tends to say that Peter himself is the rock, and what this indicates is that Peter here is being kind of instituted as the first leader of the church, the bishop of Rome, which becomes essentially the first pope, the supreme leader of the church. And then along with that belief is the idea that that authority and that seat transfers to all future bishops of Rome.

So, that's the claim. Now, I have obviously great love and respect for my Catholic brothers and sisters and many Catholic friends, and some of you here are Roman Catholics. I say this just by way of illustrating some of the differences. One of the reasons that I'm not a Catholic priest and that this isn't a Catholic church is because I see nothing in this passage that would indicate that Peter becomes the supreme leader whose authority then transfers to his successors.

This interpretation, if you look back in history, that interpretation only shows up centuries after this was written. And if you look back for the first roughly thousand years of the church, what you see is that the bishop of Rome was given a place of honor. They were given a place of primacy, right? They were recognized as a uniquely honored role, right? But had no supreme authority, right? So, for centuries you never see the bishop of Rome acting with this kind of supreme authority. Instead, when we ask how was the church governed, how did decisions get made, how did doctrines get worked out, it was conciliar, meaning councils of bishops from the various areas of influence gathering together and working out these differences and disagreements and establishing practices and doctrines together, a conciliar fashion, right? Over the centuries, though, the authority in Rome began to grow. Rome was the center of the world. It was like the Washington, D.C. or the New York City of the world. And so, after a thousand years, the authority in church began to...in Rome began to be asserted more strongly over the Christian world. And so, they began to insist that Christians everywhere not just recognize the bishop of Rome as having primacy, but actually as having supremacy.

And with that shift, something very significant happened. In the 14th century, it was decreed that anyone who does not recognize and submit to the pope as supreme is not in saving relationship with God. And so, this became a point of division between the church, right, what we call the schism and the first great schism. And so, what we see here is this difference of interpretation.

[10:13] And we have to figure out, and it's hard, and people have debated this for centuries, what did Jesus really intend here? And so, when we ask what was the intent of this, the best thing that we can do is to go back to the early church fathers. What did the early Christians in the first few centuries read in this passage? And what we see from church fathers such as John Chrysostom or Ambrose of Milan or Augustine is while they don't agree on every aspect of their interpretation, they all share this important conviction. Peter cannot be separated from his confession, and his confession cannot be separated from Christ. And so, what we have is Peter in his confessional capacity almost standing as a representative of the church as he represents the disciples responding to Jesus' question. If we understand it that way, what we see is that Peter is not the foundation because of some strength or authority that he possesses. Only a few verses later, and Pastor Hillary is going to take us through this next week, only a few verses after this, Peter horribly misinterprets the meaning of the cross, and Jesus rebukes him as being in league with Satan, which one would not expect to be the first act of the supreme leader of the church. So, Jesus rebukes him. So, what we see is that

Peter has a foundational role because God reveals Christ to him, and then he confesses that truth, and he becomes a leading witness to it. Amen. And as we... Just kidding. And as we look at what happens after this, right, we see these events unfold at Pentecost, where Peter essentially preaches a sermon that is a longer exposition of this conversation in Matthew chapter 16, where Peter preaches a sermon where he essentially says, no, Jesus is not just one of the prophets. Jesus is God's Messiah, right, the Son of the living God. And the people hear this, and thousands of people repent and put their faith in Jesus, and guess what? The church is born. The church is born on the rock of Peter's confession of faith in Christ.

I believe Peter never thought of himself as the rock on which the church is built. If you look at his epistle, the letter that he wrote to his people, in chapter 2, he says that Christ is the cornerstone of the church. And he says, well, who are we? Well, we're all like living stones that are knit through faith together. We're built together into a spiritual house but built on the cornerstone of Christ, right? Now, what difference does this make? You just endured kind of a more, you know, church history lesson here, but what difference does this make? Well, what makes you a Christian? What makes you a Christian? Is it submission to Jesus and a human leader? Or is it just Christ? Or is it that you grew up in a Christian family?

Or is it that you grew up in a Christian culture and so by default you're a Christian? Is it that you pray? Is it that you go to church? Is it that you serve and volunteer? Is it that you try your best to live as a good person and you're in the upper 50% of good people, right? What is it that makes you a Christian? And I would say if we read this correctly, it is your confession of faith in Jesus as the Messiah. That's what makes you a Christian. And what's beautiful about that is that it doesn't rely on anything other than faith in Christ. And so, everyone who confesses faith in Jesus is welcomed into the church. You have people who grew up in the faith and people who didn't. People who grew up in this culture and people who didn't. People who are morally upstanding in the upper quartile and people who you would never expect to see in a church. And they are all here together like living stones built upon the cornerstone of Christ. So, the church is first and foremost the community of people who confess Jesus as the Messiah. We're going to come back to that. The church is also more than that, though, not just a community. This is where you're going to get nervous, right? Well, some of you just got nervous. Now, others of you are going to get nervous, right? This is going to make you... If you come from a Roman Catholic background, thank you for bearing with me. I'm really sorry for the... If it was abrasive in any way, but if you come from a very low church Baptist or you've never been to church background, now you're in the crosshairs, okay? The church is also an institution. It's the I word. It's a bad word. Grounded in the apostles.

[15:19] Jesus goes on to say, 19, verse 19, I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. You know, some people say, well, he's giving that to Peter, right? Well, no. Two chapters later in Matthew 18, he gives this same authority to all the disciples who become apostles. So, he's giving this to all of his disciples. The language of keys is about access. It's about access.

So, think of Hagrid and Harry Potter. Do you remember what Hagrid's actual title was? Anybody know? Keeper of the keys, right? So, Hagrid was more than just kind of a groundskeeper. Hagrid was the keeper of the keys. He could determine who was allowed into Hogwarts, right? He had the honor of escorting people like Harry, first-time students, into this magical world that they could

never otherwise gain access to because he was the keeper of the keys. He had the ability to grant access, but very importantly, Hagrid didn't do this in his own authority. Hagrid wasn't sitting there saying, I want you, but not you, right? Hagrid was only acting with the authority that had been delegated to him by Dumbledore, who's the head wizard, the headmaster of the school, right? And so, what we see here is that Jesus is delegating authority to his apostles to open the way to the kingdom of heaven, to have the great honor of granting people access into this world that they would never otherwise be able to enter. And you say, well, how? And it is through the preaching of the gospel to those who need to hear it, as Peter does at Pentecost, right? This contrasts with Jesus' criticism of the local religious leaders of the day who were slamming the door to the kingdom in people's faces.

And so, Jesus is saying, now we're giving the keys to you. Go preach the gospel. Welcome people into the kingdom. And the language of binding and loosing is related to this. In the rabbinic literature, binding and loosing describes the authority that the rabbis had to teach and to discipline and to declare what was forbidden and what was permitted, right? And it's connected to whether or not we are able to declare that God has forgiven people or not. So, the way we determine what does and does not belong in the church is by asking whether or not it aligns with the teaching and the tradition of the apostles. And that apostolic authority was passed down to future generations generations of clergy. This language shows up in our ordination service and in particular to bishops. And that's how we see the church functioning for centuries, right? So, Jesus is establishing the church not just as a community but as an institution. And I just want to be clear, what's the difference?

Well, what He's saying is that human beings have been entrusted with spiritual authority to act in His name. Makes us nervous. He's laying the groundwork for authoritative teaching, for doctrinal standards, for established practices and boundaries, for processes for decision-making and church discipline, and for ensuring continuity beyond any particular member or leader. Now, I want to say with deep understanding, I understand not only that this makes a lot of people these days nervous, but why it makes people nervous. I mean, I think all of us love the idea of community. There's nothing offensive about community.

[19:11] It's warm. It's fuzzy. We want community. But the idea of institutional authority, I don't know many people who gravitate towards, maybe some people do in D.C., but a lot of people makes us nervous, which is understandable.

I know so many of us, myself included, have been deeply hurt, deeply hurt because of experiences we've had in the church and because of fallible leaders. And the idea of giving anybody like that power makes us incredibly nervous. I totally get it. But here's the thing. If the church were merely a community, but not an institution, you would never be able to trust it.

Do you want to know why? Because without any guardrails, every new generation of Christians would reinvent Jesus in their own image would redefine the gospel according to their ideas. Listen, Christianity is constantly in danger of being co-opted by kings, by politicians, by personal agendas, by cultural trends. Without any guardrails in a generation, Christianity would be unrecognizable. Jesus has established the church as an institution grounded in the teaching and tradition of the apostles in order to preserve and transmit truth from one generation to the next. And the apostolic tradition gives us a standard by which to measure ourselves. As we look back 2,000 years, are we still worshiping the same Jesus, preaching the same gospel, right? So, our confidence, friends, is not in the perfection of church institutions or human leaders, which will, myself included, always be flawed and deeply imperfect. That's not where our confidence lies. Our confidence lies in Christ and in the apostolic tradition that continually calls the church to repentance and reform. Perhaps our greatest capacity as a people is our capacity for self-correction. And we are only able to do that because we have a standard by which to measure ourselves.

So, whenever and wherever the church stops looking like Jesus, we need to reform it. We need to repent. Whenever and wherever the church preaches any gospel other than the one given to us by Jesus, we need to reform and we need to repent. So, the church is a community, but it's also, the good news is, an institution. We have the structures that we need to self-correct, right? Lastly, the church is a movement. It's a movement. Jesus makes this amazing promise in verse 18, on this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. What we see here is that the church is a movement that shares in the victory of Christ. The gates of Hades represent the power of death which exists because of human sin and rebellion. And what this tells us is something very

important, especially if you're here and you're not a Christian or this is... you don't normally go to church and hear things like this. Our deepest problem is not financial stress. It's not loneliness. [22:53] It's not injustice. It's not poverty or violence or war. Those are serious problems. Scripture takes them very seriously. We should too. But it says they are all symptoms. Our deepest problem is that we are cut off from the source of life, that we're cut off from God Himself, and that we're held captive, right? We're in a cage.

Right? The gate has been closed in our face. We're trapped. Jesus says the church is a movement that is sweeping across the world, setting people free, and that death no longer has any power over this movement. Now, that is extraordinary. And this promise becomes even clearer in the following verses. Jesus immediately, as we follow in this passage, He immediately goes on and tells His disciples that He's going to go to Jerusalem, that He's going to be killed, and that He's going to rise again. So, He says, the power of death no longer has any power over you. And then we keep reading, I'm going to go to Jerusalem, and I'm going to be killed.

Now, why would He say that? Well, then He says, I'm going to rise again. And this is how Jesus builds His church. It's through His death and His resurrection. He breaks the power of sin. He breaks the power of death. And then through faith in Him, the church shares in His victory. We're joined with Him, and we share in that freedom. The gate is thrown wide open, and we're invited to come out into the light of freedom. So, the church is not merely a community. It's not merely an institution that exists for its own sake. We're not just sitting around coming up with new policies and trying to ensure we survive. We are a movement, right? We are a movement. We exist to set people free by preaching the gospel to those who need to hear it. If we lose sight of that, we have forgotten why we are here.

We are a movement that exists to set people free by preaching the gospel to those who need to hear it. So, let me sort of pull this together. I want to apply it briefly, just to ask the question, okay, we looked at this and what it means, but what does it mean for me? What does it mean for you? I would say, first of all, the importance of a personal confession of faith. At some point in your life, we have to move from public opinion to private personal confession, right? So, Jesus asks every single one of us the same question. He says, you know, I know what your co-workers think. I know what your family thinks, what they raised you to believe. I know what your friends think. I know what your neighbors think. What about you? Who do you say that I am?

[25:59] You know, if anybody who knows my story, you know I sort of grew up and one Christian parent, one non-Christian parent, went to church sometimes, just called myself a Christian because I just thought, you know, I was in the Christ-haunted South, a lot of cultural Christianity. But I found it very easy to shed that label by the time I got to high school because I just, you know, it had no relevance for me, didn't have any impact on my life, didn't seem to make any difference at all. And it wasn't until my last year in college when a friend said, have you ever actually sat down, read the Gospels, and decided what you believe about Jesus? He was asking me the same question.

I know what your family thinks. I know what the church taught that you grew up in. What do you think about Jesus? And I had to admit, I'd never done that. And only when I did that, that I come to faith in a way that actually began to change the course of my life. Some of us, I think, feel this sense of emptiness in our faith, and you feel that your faith doesn't make a difference because you've never really moved from the public opinion of Jesus to your own personal confession. What do you believe?

This is the most important question of your life, and friends, everything else hinges on that answer. Number two, I would say this shows us and kind of highlights and underlines and bolds the importance of a local church, the importance of a local church. Confessing faith in Jesus is not just something we say, it is something that we are called to live out every day. And our chances of living faithfully and following Jesus if we go it alone are almost zero, almost zero. You need the support of a community.

I need the support of a community. And this is why Jesus has established the church as the way to have a relationship with Him. I'm not saying you can't connect to God by opening your Bible or by praying in your house. Of course, you can. But Jesus makes it very clear when two or three gather, He, in His name, as we do, He's uniquely present. When we share the meal at this table, He is uniquely present.

That He is meant to be experienced in community as we gather around His Word and table. And as we said earlier, the only way to know that as I go in my life day to day, week to week, trying to follow

and be faithful to Jesus, the only way I know whether I'm staying on track, whether I'm worshipping the real Jesus as opposed to a Jesus of my own making, is by being part of a community that is rooted in the apostolic tradition.

[28:43] Having brothers and sisters around me who can help me course correct if I need it. So, when you hear Hillary, when you hear me, when we encourage you to do things like come to church and worship every week. Join a ministry team and serve and serve others in the community. Come and make sure that you are praying and being prayed for, you know. Come to the classes that are helping us go deeper in our faith and understand why we believe what we believe.

Join a core group so that you'll have brothers and sisters throughout your life and throughout the weeks to encourage these things to go deeper in your heart. These are not options on a buffet table.

These are not polite suggestions. This is the way to have a relationship with God, right? This is the way we've been given by Jesus through the church.

The last thing I would say is that this gives us, I think, tremendous hope for the church. Hope for the church. For all who have experienced disappointment or scandal or deep hurt in the church, I think it can be very tempting just to give up altogether. As I said earlier, I get it.

But Jesus says, the gates of Hades will not overcome the church. All other institutions will one day crumble and fade away, but the church is eternal. It is the only institution that will last into eternity.

[30:19] Even marriage will end, but not the church. You know, Dallas Willard was a philosophy professor who wrote widely, many of you know him, on spiritual formation in the church. And he really spent much of his life addressing these kinds of questions. Why isn't the church doing a better job of producing people who look like Jesus, you know? And so, near the end of his life, not long before his death, he was interviewed. And it was a really long interview. If you've seen it or read it, it's really worth your time. But they asked him, you know, they talked all about the challenges facing the church and all of that. And the interviewer asked him, you know, when you look at how off track the church is, do you ever just throw up your hands in despair? And Willard just smiles and says, never. And the interviewer says, well, how can you not? How can you not? And Willard says, because I know Christ is the head of His church, and He knows what He's doing. Let's pray.

Lord, anything that is not of You, would You let it fade in Your mercy? Whatever in this we need to hear on a personal level, we pray that You would root it deep. Lord, we pray that as we respond by confessing our faith, by singing, by praying, by coming around Your table. Lord, we pray that in our opening ourselves to You, that we would receive You who offer Yourself to us, Lord. And we pray for those who have a hard time doing that, that Lord, in Your grace, You would soften and open our hearts, make us receptive to You, Lord. For those who need to be challenged by this, I pray that You would stir us up and give us a holy discomfort. For those who need to be comforted, I pray that You would encourage us.

And we pray all this for our good and Your glory. In the name of Jesus, amen.