

What is the Church?

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Tonight, I'm going to go ahead and encourage you to open your Bibles to the gospel of Matthew 16 and, honestly, tonight that's going to kind of be the jumping off point, for lack of better terms. I'll explain that in just a moment.

Let's pray together.

Lord Jesus, as we come before your holy, living, inspired and preserved word, God, tonight we're addressing a subject matter, a topic that the majority of us, and myself included, pretty much just assume we have the answer to. God, I pray tonight that as we read, as we study, as we investigate your word, that tonight you would either confirm that which we already know, or you would convict us to change so that we might be in line with your will, your word, and your way. Speak to us tonight in and through and by your word. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.

Some of you, and hopefully all of you, are aware that as we enter a new calendar year, as we enter a new season, that we have made a habit as a church family, as a family of faith, of having a Bible reading plan. Now I know that there are a plethora of Bible reading plans out there. There's the Bible in a year. There's the Bible chronologically. There's a lot of different styles and means by which people have what we might call a Bible reading plan. For those who may not be familiar, at least the one that we at First Baptist produce, our Bible reading plan is not necessarily the totality of the Bible within a calendar year, in fact, the Bible reading plan is really a reading along of or around the text that we as a church are studying when we gather on Sunday morning, and so for the calendar year 2023, I'm going to go ahead and give you kind of a shameless plug here in what I call the first season or in the spring, we're going to be studying the book of 1 Thessalonians, the very first letter that the Lord gave us through the Apostle Paul. I've entitled it "First Things." What are the first things that the Lord told the church? Then in the summer, we're going to study the book of Revelation. I've entitled it "Last Things." What's the last thing that the Lord told the church to be aware of or to have knowledge of? And then in the fall, we're going to do a study of the person, the life, the ministry, the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ and I've entitled it "The Main Thing." And so when we get to the fall, we're actually going to read the totality of all four gospels collectively, in the summer we're going to read through not only the book of Revelation but Daniel and some other pretty well-known prophetic chapters of scripture, but this

spring, we're going to be reading through the book of Acts and all of what we know as the letters of the Apostle Paul, and this just kind of goes along with our study throughout the calendar year.

So tonight, I thought it would be fitting to ask a question that seems rhetorical but it's not: what is the church, because after all, when you get to the letters of the Apostle Paul, the majority of them begin, "To the church at..." And so I think a lot of times we presume or we assume that we know what or who the church is, and unfortunately we do live in a world with a lot of different definitions, depictions and descriptions, and so tonight, I thought we would just walk through what the Bible says about "the church."

So I'm going to begin with a definition. The term "church" simply means a called out assembly. That's all it means, and so I know some of you may think it is irreverent but sometimes people have talked about going to a ball game and said, "Boy, it was like being at church." They're actually not being wrong by definition because the definition of the term "church" simply means a called out group, an assembly of people of like-mindedness. This is why in your Bible the term "church" is always qualified. In just a moment in Matthew 16, Jesus is going to refer to it as "my church." That's why you read the introduction to many of the letters of the Apostle Paul that says, "To the churches of Galatia. To the church at Ephesus." It is a term that simply means a called out assembly and it is qualified in scripture.

Now there are two ways or two means that the Lord depicts the church. In the book of Ephesians 5, there's this discourse that oftentimes, or at least it's becoming actually more rare today, that you hear it read within a wedding ceremony where it describes the husband, it describes the wife, and then it says in verse 32 of chapter 5, "I show you a mystery," and it talks about Christ and the church as the husband is to the wife. There are seven times in your New Testament where the Apostle Paul uses this phrase or this statement "a mystery." That doesn't mean something that is unknown, rather it means something that has been spoken of, it has been talked about but now it has come to fruition. And so in Ephesians 5 when it speaks about the church being a mystery, the depiction that we have is this is something that the Lord has been working on, it's something that has been a part and progress and in process, now it has materialized, and the depiction in Ephesians 5 as a man, as a woman, as Christ and we in relationship that we are his bride. We are in union with him. We are in relationship with him. Then there's 1 Corinthians 12. 1 Corinthians 12 describes the church as having a variety of giftedness, a variety of expressions in the sense of much like a toe is different than an elbow, which is different than an ear. They all express themselves differently but never to the detriment and/or apart of the other "parts of the body."

So when we talk about or we ask the question what is the church, we're basically speaking out what does it mean to be the called out assembly of believers in Jesus Christ who are the bride of Christ, who operate as one body together, and so tonight beginning in Matthew 16, I want to look at six very specific things or ways that the scriptures describe the church and I want to begin with the revelation of the church, the revealing of the church. Some of you may know this as what we call the law of first mention, what

that basically means is what we're about to read is the first time the term is used in scripture to describe what we just spoke of.

Beginning in verse 13 of chapter 16 of the gospel of Matthew, it says,

13 When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am? 14 And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets. 15 He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am? 16 And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God. 17 And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven. 18 And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

Now that last part of that last verse is really kind of our jumping off point tonight. Now for semantics and for clarity, I want to show you something that Matthew 16:18 says that a lot of times we "misread." I want you to hear the words of Jesus. He said, "thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church." Now again, I want you to imagine that you're in Caesarea Philippi. If you're not familiar with it, Caesarea Philippi was not only a place of great, shall we say, magnitude in those days but it was a place where people of all faiths gathered. It was a very eclectic place where very competing, differing and varying faith systems would all come and worship in the same environment, so when Jesus asked, "Who do you say that I am," this was the perfect place to ask it. In other words, "Look around you, look at all the expressions here, all the things that are happening, and where do you classify me?" What's interesting is they claimed that the world saw him as a multitude of things. He asked them very personally, "Who do you say I am?" They did not, or Simon Peter specifically, did not classify him as with anything that was around them. He said, "You are different. You are distinct. You are the Son of the living God."

Now this is where just a very elementary understanding of language comes into play. Notice what Jesus says, "thou," or you, "are Peter and upon this rock I will build my church." Now I know those listening on the radio may have difficulty with this but those that are watching online, in person, I want you to see hand gestures. Again, tonight I am in no way equating myself with Jesus, this is called a role play, okay? I want you to imagine we're at Caesarea Philippi. You are the disciples. We are gathered. I am Jesus speaking and he calls out, he says, "You are Peter. Upon this rock I will build my church." Jesus Christ made it very clear that he was the rock by which the church would be built. 1 Corinthians 10 calls him the rock. Matthew 7 calls him the rock. There is a multitude of biblical passages there that describe him as the rock by which the church must and will be built.

But notice the last statement, "the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." This is a critical understanding of what we know as the church of Jesus Christ because as we study

tonight, Jesus laid out the very first statement he made, the very first time it's mentioned, you cannot have the church apart from Jesus Christ and he made it clear that even if the depths of hell were revealed unto it, it would not prevail against it. That is what we might call the revelation, the revealing, Jesus communicating not only to his apostles but to you and I what we know as the church would be, built upon him, gates of hell shall not prevail.

A couple of pages to your right in Matthew 18, we have what I call the confirmation of the church. This is the second time that Jesus Christ himself will use this term, this phrase "called out assembly," the church. In verse 15 of Matthew 18, it is dealing with discipline, it's dealing when an individual, when a brother, when a sister has sinned against an entity, a person or even the group at large. It says,

15 Moreover if thy brother shall trespass against thee, go and tell him his fault between thee and him alone: if he shall hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. 16 But if he will not hear thee, then take with thee one or two more, that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established. 17 And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican. 18 Verily I say unto you, Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. 19 Again I say unto you, That if two of you shall agree on earth as touching any thing that they shall ask, it shall be done for them of my Father which is in heaven. 20 For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.

And the reason I refer to this as the confirmation is Jesus isn't just confirming what he's revealed two chapters earlier, he is saying that depiction of a body, that when there is an item, when there's an entity that is struggling with another, that you communicate, you deal with it as a body. Notice that this isn't a lesson for church "discipline" tonight, notice very clearly, and I know some of you have heard me say this but I need to just say it for my own sanity, the Bible does not say when somebody has sinned against you go and blast it on social media. That's not what it says. The Bible says if a fellow believer has sinned against you, you go to them personally, you go to them privately, you go to them one-on-one. If they have not or will not hear you, it says you take two or three witnesses. That doesn't mean somebody in your Amen corner, that means somebody who they've committed the same transgression against. And then it says and if that doesn't work, what do you do? You take it to the church.

Can I use a very oftentimes painful but very realistic analogy? There are times in our lives where there are certain parts of our body that are not functioning as well as they have in days past. There are many of you here that will testify that you've had replacements, you've had knee replacements, hip replacements, all kinds of issues in your life, but you would never, and if you so chose to I don't know why, but you would never go to a surgeon to have a knee replacement surgery and say, "Do you know what? This isn't really gonna affect the rest of my body, just go ahead and start cutting on it. Don't

worry about anything else." What do you do to your body? You have an anesthesiologist come in and put it to sleep, right? And there's a reason. Why? Because the entire body must respond, adapt and deal with the situation that is now at hand if we have a knee or whatever it may be that is not operating the way it needs to be and something needs to be done with and to it. So when Jesus says you go one-on-one, you take two or three witnesses, then you take it to the body, basically he is confirming this entity, his body, the church must function in totality even among our differences.

So let's talk about the origination, the church as we know it. When did we "start"? Well, go to the gospel of John 20. Now some of you may feel like tonight is like Bible drill or some of you grew up old school Sword drill but that's okay. If we're going to talk about a subject matter as important as this is, then we ought to discuss what does the Bible say and not what does somebody else say. When we talk about the origination of the church, we're not talking about the origination of a group of people getting together. Go back to the depiction. When did the body of Christ begin? When as an entity did we form? When did we originate? In John 20, beginning in verse 19 after the resurrection of Jesus Christ it says,

19 Then the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled for fear of the Jews, came Jesus and stood in the midst, and saith unto them, Peace be unto you. 20 And when he had so said, he shewed unto them his hands and his side. Then were the disciples glad, when they saw the Lord. 21 Then said Jesus to them again, Peace be unto you: as my Father hath sent me, even so send I you. 22 And when he had said this, he breathed on them, and saith unto them, Receive ye the Holy Ghost: 23 Whose soever sins ye remit, they are remitted unto them; and whose soever sins ye retain, they are retained.

Notice what Jesus said: receive the Holy Ghost. In other words, it is at that point the fulfillment of John 14, John 16 when he said, "It's actually expedient for me that I depart from you for when I depart from you the one who is the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth will come and dwell within you." And so this church that Jesus spoke of, this church that Jesus confirmed if we're going to be literal tonight, it began when those first apostles became the dwelling place, the temple of the Holy Spirit.

But what about its manifestation? When, for lack of better terms, did it go public? Well, that's when we turn to Acts 2 and tonight we're not going to read all 47 verses of Acts 2, it's probably a story and a setting that you know well. It is the Feast of Pentecost. It's 50 days after Passover. According to scripture in verse 4 and 5, there are Jews that are present from every nation on the earth. Why would that be the case? Because Pentecost was a Jewish festival. It was a Jewish feast. In fact, of the Jewish feasts, there are three of them that particularly the males had to attend every year. You had to go to Passover. You had to go to Pentecost. And you had to go to the Feast of Tabernacles, which takes place in the fall. And so when it says there were there Jews of every nation, that's not just a blanket statement, that's a literal account because you would have had them from all places.

You know the story well. It is there that those whom the Lord had already breathed into began to speak, as the Bible says, with other tongues. According to Acts 2, they heard each of them in their own language. Then Peter gets up and he begins to preach that Jesus Christ was crucified, rose from the dead, and that these Jews who denied him should believe in him. I want to pick up the story in verse 42 when it says,

42 And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. 43 And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. 44 And all that believed were together, and had all things common; 45 And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. 46 And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, 47 Praising God, and having favour with all the people. [Listen to this,] And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.

And so this famous Pentecost event when these 3,000 souls came and they believed, it says the Lord added to his church, and so we have the origination with the apostles, we have the manifestation or the going public, shall we say, in Acts 2. Tonight, I actually want to deal with the culmination. You say, "The culmination?" You do realize there's actually been more time prior to the church than since the church. If you look at just the dating, just a simplistic dating of scripture, there were more years since the garden of Eden before the church than there have been since the church, and according to the book of Romans, there's actually a culmination of the church.

So if you would, turn with me one book to the right to the book of Romans 11. As you're turning to Romans 11, one of the individuals who actually served one of the longest tenured pastorates in basically the American continent is a man years ago by the name of Wally Amos Criswell, or most people know him as W. A. Criswell. He was at First Baptist, Dallas, TX for 5+ decades and he said that the two verses we're about to read are the hardest two verses in all the New Testament. So here we go, verse 25 and 26 of the book of Romans 11. It says,

25 For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery,

Push pause. Do you remember the depiction we just shared about the church? Remember it's called a mystery? This is something the Lord has been communicating but we don't have all the pieces to the puzzle yet. He says,

25 For I would not, brethren, that ye should be ignorant of this mystery, lest ye should be wise in your own conceits; that blindness in part is happened to Israel, until the fulness of the Gentiles be come in. 26 And so all Israel shall be saved: as it is written, There shall come out of Sion the Deliverer, and shall turn away ungodliness from Jacob:

Now again, Dr. Criswell may have been accurate, this is a very difficult passage of scripture, but what's interesting is, and I mentioned this, this morning, when you look at the letters of the Apostle Paul whether it's the church at Thessalonica, the church at Ephesus, the church at Colossae, the churches of Galatia, the church at Rome, the overwhelming majority of people who the Apostle Paul spoke to were Gentile, and here in Romans 11 it says there's coming a day where the time of the Gentiles shall be fulfilled, and I don't want to fast forward too far into the summer season but when we read the book of Revelation, we're going to discover some terms there that the Apostle Paul doesn't use a whole lot like the 12 tribes of Israel, the temple, all these things that are very Jewish in nature and not so much Gentile at all, in other words, that depiction of the bride of Christ. There are passages all throughout the scripture, there are songs that we've sung throughout the ages where it talks about this time where the bride will be caught up unto the groom, where we will be taken and be with him forever.

There is a culmination. There is coming a time in some form and/or fashion with what we know as the church of Jesus Christ will be taken up to be with him forever. Jesus revealed it. He confirmed it. It was originated. It's been manifested. But there is a day that it shall be culminated. Here's the biggest question that I want to ask tonight, and really my purpose for doing so is kind of marrying the first things and the last things of this spring and this summer: is there an indication so that we might know, for lack of better terms, where we are on God's proverbial timeline? When you get to the book of Revelation 2 and 3 and tonight we're not going to read through all those, I promise, for the sake of time, you discover that the Lord gives a message through not the Apostle Paul but through the Apostle John from the island of Patmos. He gives it to the seven churches which are in Asia and he begins with the church of Ephesus and then Smyrna and Laodicea. It goes all the way through what we know as Laodicea.

Now as you study these churches, you'll find out some interesting things. Some of them were large. Some of them were small. All of them had some things of great qualities but two of them there's nothing negative spoken of, as well. The second church, the church of Smyrna which was the persecuted church, there's nothing negative said about the church of Philadelphia that the word went out from, there's nothing negative about that, but as you look at these churches what's interesting is they all have their good's, most of them have their bad's, but they're all very distinct and they're all very different. What's interesting is when you read the beginning of what we know as the book of Revelation, you get the idea that this message that all of the churches received all of the messages. In other words, the church at Ephesus got them all, okay? It wasn't like when Paul wrote to the Thessalonians that, "Hey, you just got your letter." You get the idea that they all got a copy of all of them.

You say, "Why is that critical? Why is that important?" Tonight in a very brief fashion, I just want to take a step back and I want you to think about these seven churches. This is going to be very brief, just going to skip the rock across the water, and I want you to think about them from a very high level view.

The first church, Ephesus, is one that is doctrinally sound. It is pure in its belief. In fact, it calls out those that are false in doctrine, erroneous in belief system. There's only one problem, you may remember. Remember, they lost their first love. In other words, their passion for Jesus Christ was waning at some level. That second church was very small in nature, heavily persecuted, in fact, didn't believe they were making any difference at all but the Lord came and said, "Oh, you're making a huge difference." By the time you get to the third and the fourth church, it's heresy and erroneous teachings and what we might even call apostasy. It's a time, shall I say, of darkness and despair. And by the time you get to the last church, the church at Laodicea, this is a church that is lukewarm. It's not hot. It's not cold. It's just kind of what we might call straddling the fence. In fact, the term Laodicea, the term itself, much like the church means a called out assembly, the term Laodicea literally means the rights of the people. It's what the word means. It's what the term means.

You say, "Why is this important?" Because when we talk about the indication, is it possible that God was giving us a little something? Is it possible he was giving us an indication? Is it possible that if we step back 30,000 feet and we look down, he's not just giving us a message about respective local churches, he's not just giving us a message about what they were struggling with or what they were succeeding with, is it possible that he gave us an indication, he gave us, for lack of terms, a road map of how it would go? We, the church, read the book of Acts, it's like the church at Ephesus. We started out on fire, did we not? We started out with solid doctrine. We were committed but there was a time that persecution set in, we lost our first love. There was a time for hundreds of years where there was as many or more martyred for the faith than lived for the faith. And then there was a time period for many many centuries where the church of Jesus Christ was very lackluster and, shall I say, compromised at best. There have been times like the church of Philadelphia where there was a revival and a recapturing of truth but the last church is described as a church that is more interested in the rights of themselves than in the word of God. Is it possible that when we talk about the church being originated, manifested and culminated, that we actually have an indication of what that is going to look like?

Now I want to go back in closing to the revelation. What did Jesus say? He said the gates of hell shall not prevail. Now I think he was being literal when he said that but do you know what I find interesting is once you get past chapter 3 of the book of Revelation, you never see the word "church" again, you never see the term again, and what happens? The gates of hell open up. In fact, in chapter 9, we'll get there this summer, it literally says the bottomless pit opens up and all hell breaks loose. Now I believe in Matthew 16, Jesus basically said, "There is nothing that can change, impact, effect, or alter what I'm doing," but is it also possible he was saying, "Hey, my bride, my body, never going to have hell opened up on it at all." It is originated, it is manifested, it is culminated, and it is possible that I think we have some indications of where it's headed.

Now what does that mean for you and I tonight? I'm going to give you a statement you may or may not be familiar with and it's a rhetorical response to a rhetorical question. The question is when is Jesus coming back? The answer is we're closer today than we

were yesterday. What I mean by that is this: I think you would be hard-pressed to convince me that we are not living in the Laodicean age. You would be hard-pressed tonight to convince me that we live in a day today where even those who claim to be a church are more interested in the opinions and the rights of people in their lives than they are "Thus saith the Lord." We live in a time period today not just in America, this is worldwide, where we are more interested in what we think, feel, or desire, than what God said.

So what does that mean? If the indication is right, that means we are on the doorsteps of, we are on the brink of, it could be in five days, it could be in 50 years, I'm not in charge, he is. All I know is this, that even in the very brutal but simplistic game of football, when the game is on the line at the end, every team gets in the hurry-up offense. In other words, they don't go and huddle for 40 seconds, they call plays on the fly. They need to get in as much as they can, while they can, because the clock is ticking.

Tonight, I want to close with a statement from a dear friend of mine of days gone by. He means this for our personal lives but it actually applies to the church as a whole. He says we worship and we serve the God of the two-minute warning. What he means by that, in the game of football you know that when two minutes comes in the NFL they stop the clock, they give everybody a free timeout, and they say, "Okay, boys, things are about to get a little crazy around here. Here we go." And those last two minutes at times tend to be more chaotic and hectic and entertaining than the previous minutes all combined.

What does that statement mean we serve the God of the last two minutes or the two minute warning? I don't know about you, but I spend a lot of my days going, "All right, God, I heard you. I'm claiming you promised but I haven't seen it yet, when are you going to show up?" In my personal life, God shows up usually at the last minute. I'm wanting him to go ahead and do it day 1 and he says, "Well, out of 100 days, I'm going to show up at the end of day 99." That's just kind of how he works which is kind of how I see him working in scripture when it comes to the church. If the indication is true, if we are in the two minute warning, then that means the time for huddling should be brief. You say, "What do you mean the time for huddling?" You do know that never once in the game of football has a touchdown been scored from the huddle. You just let that sink in for a moment. The touchdown is scored when the play is run. We've huddled up this evening and we'll continue to huddle until the Lord returns, but if the indication is right, it is time that you and I put a little step to it, so to speak, because we are in the last two minutes of the church.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. Tonight, as we come to a time of response, you may be that person this evening who's never called on the name of the Lord. The Bible says whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Maybe tonight the Spirit of God used the word of God to convict you of your sin condition, the truth of Jesus Christ, and your need to call out and to be, as we described tonight, his bride. Maybe tonight you're already a child of God, you're already a son, a daughter of God, and tonight the Lord has revealed something to you, a decision that must be rendered, must be followed up. Maybe it's believer's baptism. Maybe it's being a part of this incredible

congregation. Whatever it may be, we are here, we're waiting, we're willing. Or maybe tonight it's not about stepping out and stepping forward and indicating a "public decision," maybe tonight the Spirit of God has used his word that when you exit and depart from this place, you take a serious look at the perspective you have of being a part of his body.

Lord Jesus, as we come to this time of decision, God, thank you, thank you that as we read all these scriptures, that though we are not worthy, though we are as sheep that have gone astray, that you would see us as your bride, you would claim us as your body, and you would care for us as you've described. Help us, O God, tonight not to just flippantly look at the subject and say, "Well, I got the answer there." God, help us to allow your Spirit to really do a work in our hearts and our lives and see who we are as your church. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.