



Matthew 16:13-19

SPOT THE MYSTERY STRUCTURE: When it was built for an international exposition in the last century, the structure was called monstrous by the citizens of the city, who demanded it be torn down as soon as the exposition was over.

Yet from the moment its architect first conceived it, he took pride in it and loyally defended it from those who wished to destroy it. He knew it was destined for greatness. Today it is one of the architectural wonders of the modern world and stands as the primary landmark of Paris, France. The architect, of course, was Alexandre Gustave Eiffel. His famous tower was built in 1889. EIFFEL TOWER

Today I want to talk about another structure - the church. UPON THIS ROCK The church ranks as one of those great misunderstood world phenomena. You'll find that the church and Christians are much maligned whether we think that's justified or not. How many times have you been faced with the accusation that the church has started wars, been at the source of massacres, split societies into violent opposing groups - Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, Catholics and Orthodox in former Yugoslavia, it harbours child abusers, it supports crazy TV evangelists, it holds money unethically but it's always pleading poverty, it's old fashioned, out of touch, weird, divisive, squabbling, condemnatory. "But ... but ... that isn't what our church is about - we stand for better than that". But the mud sticks.

In fact, it sticks so much in our society that the past three decades has seen an exodus from Christian churches the length and breadth of our land. In our own town you'll find plenty of people who used to go to church but no longer do. Many of them have or had a real faith in Christ, yet they don't see church relevant to them any more.

Yet Jesus remains loyal to His church - which He entrusted to an unlikely band of disciples, whom he defended, prayed for, and prepared to spread the gospel. To outsiders and sometimes insiders the church seems like incapable blunderers. But the church is God's duly appointed focus for all the people who have come to know Jesus as Saviour and Lord. There is no other context, no other way that Christians should operate on this earth. And Jesus, the architect of the church, knows this structure is destined for greatness when he returns.

Over the next few weeks I'm going to explore what church is. We're hopefully going to see that church is not an optional extra but an essential for the growth of every believer. We're going to see that church is not a spectator sport, nor is it a consumer service that exists for the comfort of believers. Instead we are going to see that the Holy Spirit has dropped us in it - and that we are not only wanted but needed by Him to serve the purposes of God. We're going to explore what the church is, what being a member of the church is about, and what responsibility we have to the Saviour we have pledged to follow and obey.

The most obvious place to start, is to ask the question - WHAT IS THE CHURCH? It's a good question. I can start by quoting one of the verses we read this morning ON THIS ROCK I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH. The church is something that Jesus has built and it belongs to Him. I will build my church. The church is something conceived of by God, built by Jesus - and to put it to the bottom line - it belongs to Him.

The problem is that different people have a different opinion of what the church is. ST PETER'S Here's the view of many - it's an organisation that's run from impressive offices. It's how the world sees the church. In fact that's the way it treats just about every church in the land. We're just charities, clubs, social organisations who have management, keep accounts, have

properly constituted meetings, have legal responsibility. Whether that is a denomination or a local church, that's how the world sees the church – and quite honestly that's how many Christians see church – an organisation.

Or worse, BUILDING the most common view of a church is a building. Church is seen as a building. Look on most church websites and you'll see prominently displayed is a church building – usually empty. Incidentally, ours does have a small picture of the building amongst other pictures.

What does the Bible say about church? The Greek for church is EKKLESIA. The basic meaning of the word ekklesia is “an assembly.” It is built on the preposition ek, meaning “from, out of,” and the verb kaleo, meaning “to call, summon.” The idea is of a group of people summoned into assembly for a specific purpose.

In Greek society, ekklesia primarily had a political meaning rather than religious. For example, in Athens, the ekklesia was the regularly called assembly of citizens to an agreed upon place (the Pnyx) to discuss city affairs. Luke uses the word ekklesia in the sense of a political gathering in Acts 19:32–40. Most of the time in the New Testament (108 out of 114 times), however, the word ekklesia refers to the church, the institution Jesus established and to which Christians belong. Christians are a group of people who have been “called” together:

- God does the calling (2 Thessalonians 2:14)
- We are called out of a sinful world (Acts 2:40; Gal. 1:4) and darkness (1 Peter 2:9; Acts 26:18)
- We are called into assembly, fellowship, and service.

If the church did not assemble regularly, it could not be referred to as an ekklesia. Therefore, we must never minimize the important role the formal, called assembly of the saints should play in our lives. Regular assembly so characterized the early Christians that they were simply referred to collectively as “the ekklesia,” or “the assembly.” Hebrews 10:25 urges us, “not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near” (ESV).

It's a fairly generic word – and used slackly in the NT – to describe all of God's people worldwide, in a region or in a local area. Over the centuries we have spiritualised the idea more than the disciples of the first century would have recognised. We have made church into a holy word. The continentals just transliterate ekklesia into words like l'eglise, iglesia or igreja. That always flashes alert lights for me. Whenever Greek words are used untranslated when they have an obvious meaning it means that Christians have probably done something they shouldn't have done with the idea the Greek word conveys. It gets even worse when in another language we create a holy word for something with an easy translation – so assembly becomes church because modern church is sometimes anything but assembly, like an organisation or building. In fact the English “church” started life as another Greek word of much later origin than the Bible kŭriakon (dōma) – the Lord's house which got changed into the northern European kerke, kirk or church – referring to a building – the Lord's house. So instead of associating ekklesia with an assembly of people, we associate it with a building – and it isn't.

Some Christians have tried to avoid the word church altogether as it just doesn't reflect the scriptural word ekklesia. Some even use the word assembly. Actually, up until the end of the 19th century, Baptists weren't allowed by law to describe either themselves or their buildings as churches. They usually called their buildings meeting houses or chapels. It suited because they saw the church as ekklesia – people. CHURCH IS PEOPLE Baptists started referring to their buildings as churches from the late nineteenth century onwards which was probably a backwards step because people then started to think of the church as building and organisation rather than a body of people.

Therefore the biblical picture of ekklesia then is is an assembly of people called together for a purpose. That's one of the reasons why we changed the logo of the church to what you see on the screen. Church is People! And we are all called to be in it. And we will see in the coming weeks that means we are called to be part of something. There is no such thing as a Christian who is not part of church.

But there is a second thing I want to point out about ekklesia this morning. Here's one of the verses again: 16 *Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."* 17 *"Good for you, Simon son of John!" answered Jesus. "For this truth did not come to you from any human being, but it was given to you directly by my Father in heaven.* 18 *And so I tell you, Peter: you are a rock, and on this rock foundation I will build my church, and not even death will ever be able to overcome it.* Catholics over the years have suggested that because Peter was nicknamed "the Rock" that Jesus meant that the church would be established on him. But what Jesus says here is a play on words which was common in Greek particularly. Peter has just proclaimed Jesus' Messiahship – something God had blessed Peter by revealing the fact to him. But what was the implication of Jesus being the Son of the Living God?

Jesus plays on words "OK Simon, you're known as "Rocky". On this rock (referring to Himself), I'm going to build My church. Why would He do that? Because in the OT one of the most common descriptions of God was as a Rock – a rock, a place of strength and safety. The Son of God attributes that to Himself and on His firm foundation He builds His assembly – His Church.

So Jesus plays on Rocky's name to state He is the rock on which the church was to be founded. The Church is not just any old assembly of called people. These people are called by Him, exist for His benefit and have the benefit of His presence and protection.

I want to finish with this thought this morning. As Christians, we are automatically made part of the church of God – His group of people, under His authority and to fulfil His purposes. What a shame we so often feel we want church to be something else. Let me tell you a story. Here is a picture of THE GUILDHALL, WINDSOR. It was to be constructed as a town hall and marketplace but the architect died before building started so Sir Christopher Wren of St Paul's fame was contracted to complete it. He redesigned it so that the whole structure would stand on the arches around the bottom, leaving a large void for market stalls at the bottom. Local politicians were worried because there seemed nothing to hold up the great expanse above it. Wren assured them that the whole thing would stand up OK but they insisted he put pillars underneath to hold the floor up. This he reluctantly did – and here are THE PILLARS. In the 19th century, some work was done on the Guildhall and contractors were astonished to find that when they stripped out the ceiling, that the pillars stopped 2 inches short of contact with the ceiling beams. Wren had been so sure his floor would hold that he made sure that they were just decoration and held nothing up. And it remains so today – but still modern contractors have slotted in some wood into the gaps – just in case!

Jesus is the rock on which the church stands, yet so often we want to add to what the church is – we make it into organisations, denominations, buildings, charities and forget that what really holds it all together is Jesus. Similarly, even though Jesus is our rock, we so often want to prop our lives and our churches up with other supports that the world provides – emotional supports – usually other people, money, drugs, careers and we forget that Jesus is fundamentally the rock on which we stand, and the safe place isn't a lonely place, but in the safe place that Jesus has established for us – in the assembly of His people – the church. Church should be the place where we are safe, where satan can't pick us off because not even death will ever be able to overcome the church.

The challenge for us as a church this morning is: how much is our church fellowship a safe place for people to run into and to find the presence of Jesus, to find support and to grow? If it isn't, then what are we going to do about it?

And to us as individuals – how important is the church – the assembly of God's people – to us? If it's where God wants us to be, why do we so often want to run elsewhere? Why is it that we hope to be safe spiritually and emotionally elsewhere? Why do we rely on other things?

Church is God's place because it's built on the rock- Jesus!