



What is the church?

From the moment of his conception, Jesus' mission was tied to our spiritual recovery. An angel told Joseph that the child that Mary was carrying was conceived by the Holy Spirit. The child was to be named Jesus "because he will save his people from their sins." (Matthew 1:21)

This redemptive theme was echoed by Jesus throughout his public ministry. He said he had come "to seek and to save what was lost" and "to give his life as a ransom for many" (Luke 19:10; Matthew 20:28). The mission of Jesus involved securing forgiveness of sins through the sacrifice of himself upon the cross.

"Didn't Jesus come to build his church?" you might ask (Matthew 16:18). Yes.

Is the church, then, something in addition to Christ's redemptive mission? No.

The Greek word for church is *ekklesia*, which literally means "called out". Jesus would build his church by calling people to be his disciples, forgiving their sins and reconciling them to God and to each other by his death and resurrection.

When Scripture is compared with Scripture, a picture emerges of the church as a community of people whom Jesus has saved. For example, Paul says that Jesus bought the "church of God" "with his own blood" (Acts 20:28).

John says that Jesus bought individuals "... with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation" (Revelation 5:9).

What then is the church? The church is *people whose sins have been forgiven*. The definition is as simple as that.

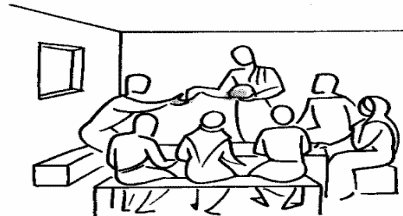
We can fine-tune our picture of the church by looking at the activities of Saul of Tarsus, later to become the great apostle Paul. Before his conversion to Jesus, Paul gave the church a rough time.

In persecuting the church, Paul did not vandalise holy buildings. Instead, he persecuted holy *people*: "Saul began to destroy the church. Going from house to house, he dragged off men and women and put them in prison." (Acts 8:3)

Later he recalled that those he persecuted were people who had come to believe in Jesus and had called upon the Lord for their salvation. This was the church that Paul had persecuted. (Acts 22:4,19; Galatians 1:13)

Putting all this together we see that the church does not include *all* people, not even all religious people.

The church is specifically for *those people whose sins have been forgiven*, whose faith rests in Jesus alone for salvation, people who have a new relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. This is the true church of Christ which Jesus came to establish.



All of us are one body, for we all share the same loaf.
1 Corinthians 10:17

An Every Member Ministry

The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ ... Now the body is not made up of one part but of many ... Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. (1 Corinthians 12:12-27)

The church is the body of Christ. Every Christian is a member of that body with a distinctive contribution to make to the life of the body.

And the Lord has structured the church like a body composed of different and varied members. It is this variety that enables our physical body and the body of Christ to function effectively.

Within the church the members are different. This is God's design and purpose. Furthermore, it is God's prerogative to give us a particular gift or gifts, therefore there should be no jealousy among the members for the differences are of God's creating.

Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others.

We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully. (Romans 12:4-8)

Within every congregation of God's people the gifts he has bestowed must be nurtured and developed so that the church can function effectively. Each member must strive to use the gifts they have received from the Lord. This is clearly addressed in Paul's letter to the saints at Ephesus.

But to each one of us grace has been given as Christ apportioned it ... It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up ... From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work. (Ephesians 4:7-16)

The church must engage in a shared ministry where each member has a contribution to make to the community. Furthermore, the church must encourage members to use their gifts and provide them the necessary opportunity to do so.

The gifts we have will minister both to the church and to those outside the community of faith. When this occurs we will witness the body of Christ at work in our world. Just as Jesus intended.



Upon This Rock I Will Build My Church

When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it." (Matthew 16:13-19)

Controversy surrounded the identity of Jesus; opinions were in a constant state of flux.

Some said he was an evil troublemaker, while others said he must be from God. Jesus was aware of what the opinion polls were saying when he asked his apostles who people thought he was. Their reply showed the extent of the speculation surrounding his identity.

Was he any of the above-mentioned characters, or was he someone else?

Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God, came by way of divine revelation from the Father and not by human speculation.

When Jesus spoke about building his church upon a rock, what was he referring to?

In answering this question it is vital that we not lose sight of what the Father had just revealed about Jesus. When the Father endorsed Jesus as his Son, he was saying that Jesus is God the Son, equal in every way to God the Father (John 10:30-36).

It does not make sense to think that Jesus would talk about building his church and, in the very same context, have nothing to say about the revelation the Father had just made known about Jesus' true identity.

When we think of building something, we think of the need for a foundation. If the building is to last, then the foundation must be solid. The church that Jesus came to build must also have a solid foundation.

It will have to be a foundation which has been tested and found reliable, a foundation which can endure for all time, and one upon which all generations of Christians can confidently place their faith.

There is only one Person who qualifies to provide such a foundation — Jesus, the Christ, the Son of the living God. His deity is the solid rock, the unshakeable foundation upon which the church rests.

The writings of the apostles confirm that the church is indeed built upon Jesus, that he alone is the rock upon which it has been established.

Scripture says that the church is 'built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.' (Ephesians 2:20)

'For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.' (1 Corinthians 3:11)



Binding & Loosing

After giving Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven, Jesus delegated authority to him to carry out his ministry.

"Whatever you shall bind on earth," Jesus said to Peter, "shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:19)

This was not a blank cheque for Peter to do whatever he wanted. The authority to bind and loose was given in the context of preaching forgiveness of sins through the gospel.

This harmonises with the Lord's parting words to the apostles: "If you forgive the sins of any, their sins have been forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they have been retained" (John 20:23 NASA).

Binding and loosing are equivalent to retaining and forgiving sins. [How does this work out in practice?](#)

On the Day of Pentecost, Peter preached the gospel and 3000 people believed that message and received remission of their sins. (Acts 2:38-41) These people were loosed from their sins when they were forgiven. The sins of those who rejected the gospel were retained or bound.

The authority to bind and loose was not exclusively Peter's, though he played a prominent role.

All the apostles were engaged in opening the way to heaven through preaching the gospel, thereby binding and loosing the sins of the impenitent and the penitent. However, this does not exhaust the meaning of the Lord's words.

The authority to bind and loose was given by Jesus to every congregation of believers.

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Jesus made provision for the church to deal with problems that present themselves in the local congregation.

He said that when an offender in the church refuses to repent of his wrongdoing, having first been confronted privately, then before witnesses, and finally before the church, the fellowship of the church is no longer to be extended to that person. He is to be rejected.

What the church does on earth is what God has already done in heaven. That is what the Lord meant when he gave instruction not just to Peter, but to the whole church:

"Truly I say to you, whatever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." (Matthew 18:19)



The Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven

What then did Jesus mean when he gave Peter the "keys of the kingdom"?

The most prominent statue in our local church was that of Saint Peter. He was an austere figure seated upon a throne, with one hand raised toward heaven and the other holding two large keys.

I seldom passed that statue without being reminded of Jesus' words to Peter, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven."

How are we to understand these words?

By putting a number of questions to the problem we are trying to solve, we can arrive at the correct answer.

First, what are keys used for?

Keys are used to allow us access to places previously closed. When Jesus gave Peter the keys of the kingdom of God, he gave him the means of opening the way into the kingdom of heaven.

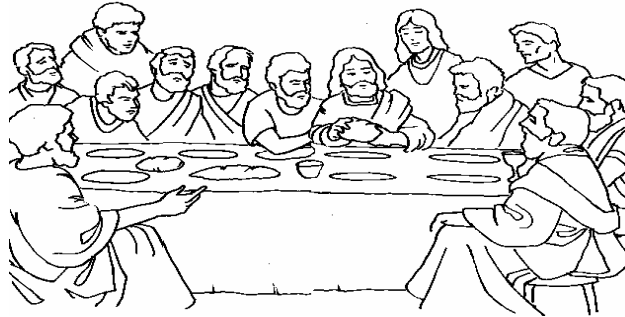
Second, how did Peter use these keys to allow us access into the kingdom of heaven? Peter was the first to preach the gospel to both the Jews and Gentiles.

Those who believed in Jesus were baptised in his name and entered the kingdom of heaven. (Acts 2:38; 10:48) Of course, the other apostles were also engaged in this evangelistic work, but Peter did have a prominent role to play initially.

Keys were spoken about by Jesus on another occasion — the time he rebuked the religious leaders of his day for the way in which they abused the truth that God had revealed.

The way they handled truth was a hindrance rather than a help to those who heard them. "Woe to you lawyers!" Jesus said. "For you have taken away the key of knowledge; you did not enter in yourselves, and those who were entering in you hindered." (Luke 11:52 NASB)

When Jesus spoke of the keys of the kingdom he symbolised the gospel, which opens the way back to the Father for all who will embrace its message.



The Lord's Supper

While they were eating, Jesus took bread, gave thanks and broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my body." Then he took the cup, gave thanks and offered it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins. I tell you, I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now on until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom." (Matthew 26:26-29)

On the night he was betrayed, Jesus gathered with his apostles in the upper room to celebrate the Passover.

This event recalled God's deliverance of the children of Israel from the bondage of Egypt.

It foreshadowed a time when God would bring about deliverance from the bondage of sin for his people through the sacrificial death of Jesus the Lamb of God. This is the setting for the Lord's Supper.

The achievements of Christ's atoning death are set forth in the Bible. 'And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Christ once for all ... And where these [sins] have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin.' (Hebrews 10:10,18).

Through his death upon the cross, Jesus achieved for us the full pardon of our sins. We can now stand before God justified, pardoned, cleansed.

The sacrifice of Christ is a one-time offering, an unrepeatable act. It was the apostolic teaching that the church gather together on the first day of the week, Sunday, and partake of the Lord's Supper. (Acts 20:7; 1 Corinthians 11:17-34)

In breaking bread and drinking wine, believers are not only remembering what the Lord accomplished; in the Lord's Supper we are having fellowship with him and with each other.

We are affirming that his death has reconciled us to the Father and, along with each believer, we are united in Christ.



What Does the Bible Say About Celibacy?

Celibacy is a gift from God, but not everyone has this gift. Jesus said, "Not everyone can accept this word, but only those to whom it has been given. For some are eunuchs because they were born that way; others were made that way by men; and others have renounced marriage because of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it." (Matthew 19:11-12)

Those who are celibate for the sake of the kingdom of God can serve God in ways that a married person cannot.

For example, suppose an opportunity arose for preaching the gospel in a remote and difficult area of the world and there were two candidates for the job: one is celibate and the other is married with a young family.

The obvious choice in this case would be the one who is celibate and free from the responsibility that goes with raising a young family.

This is not to say that celibacy is a superior gift to marriage. It's not. Though it is different.

The work God has called me to undertake has been blessed by being married with a family. I would be greatly hampered if they were not part of my life and ministry.

In the early church (and we need to be the same as them), the apostles were married and Peter speaks of his believing wife. (1 Corinthians 9:3-5).

Furthermore, in the church of Christ the Bible tells us that the bishops were to be married. The Bible says a bishop was to be 'the husband of one wife... He must manage his own family well and see that this children obey him with proper respect. If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?' (1 Timothy 3:1-5)

It is not in harmony with the Bible to teach that to be a priest one must be celibate. You may want to read our article on [Priesthood](#).



Who are God's Priests Today?

Priesthood has a long history stretching back to the Old Testament.

We are introduced to Israel's priests shortly after their captivity in Egypt. From among the twelve tribes that composed the nation of Israel, God chose the priesthood from the tribe of Levi. Priesthood was therefore based entirely on ancestry.

Their duty consisted in representing the people before God and offering sacrifices on their behalf. However, it was not God's intention that this type of priesthood should last forever.

Jesus introduced a priesthood that embraces all Christians. It would not be composed of men born into the tribe of Levi, but would embrace all men and women who have been **'born again of water and the Holy Spirit.'** (John 3:5)

One does not need to have a vocation to be a priest. Neither does one require years of special training. Scripture make it very plain that if you are a Christian you are a priest and part of the **'royal priesthood'**. (1 Peter 2:9)

Furthermore, your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20) And, as a priest, you can offer to God **'spiritual sacrifices'**. (Hebrews 13:15-16)

Where there is a Christian, there is also a priest. There is also a temple and spiritual sacrifices can be offered to God. This is the **'royal priesthood'** revealed in the Word of God.

