

# **Jesus Is Building His Church**

## **What Is the Church?**

*Matthew 16:18*

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# What Is the Church?

## Scripture

For the next four weeks or so I would like to interrupt my series in Paul's letter to the Romans and preach a short series of sermons on the church.

I am doing so for the following reason. Over the course of this past year the Session of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian church has been looking at how we raise up leaders—and officers in particular—in this church. We plan to adopt an approach that clarifies our present system. We want people to grow in their personal character, in their public ministry, and in their theological education. And in order to do so effectively, it is important that you understand how Jesus builds his church.

So, to that end, I am preaching a short series of sermons titled, "Jesus Is Building His Church." I want to draw your attention to the narrative where Jesus told his disciples that he is building his church. It is found in Matthew 16:13-20, and the particular text for our focus is Matthew 16:18. Let us then read the Word of God:

<sup>13</sup> Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" <sup>14</sup> And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." <sup>15</sup> He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" <sup>16</sup> Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." <sup>17</sup> And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. <sup>18</sup> **And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.** <sup>19</sup> I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." <sup>20</sup> Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ. (Matthew 16:13-20)

## Introduction

Jesus is building his church. He has been doing so for centuries. Whether in Jerusalem or in Judea, in Samaria or in the ends of the earth, Jesus is building his church.

John G. Paton left Scotland with his young bride, Mary Ann, on April 16, 1858 to sail for the New Hebrides, known today as Vanuatu, a series of Islands in the South Pacific Ocean, about 1,000 miles east of Australia. The Patons went to Vanuatu as missionaries to take the Gospel to a cannibalistic people who had never heard about Jesus.

Almost 7 months later they arrived on the island of Tanna. A few months after that, in February 1859, Mary Ann gave birth to a son. But within a month both mother and son were dead. The loss for Paton was almost too much to bear. “But for Jesus,” he said, “I must have gone mad and died beside that lonely grave!”<sup>1</sup>

Reaching the Islanders of Tanna with the good news of God’s grace was extraordinarily difficult. Historian Ruth Tucker said that the Islanders “were deeply involved in deadly and often subtle games of warfare among themselves. Killings occurred almost daily and were accepted as a routine part of life, with occasional violent eruptions that threatened the whole population. It was a tension-filled time with hardly a moment for relaxation.”<sup>2</sup>

But, over the course of time the Gospel triumphed, the Islanders were converted, and a church was established on Tanna. Almost 30 years later, in 1886, having been gone for about four years, Paton returned to the Island. Here is his recollection of what happened:

Before daybreak I lay awake thinking of all my experiences on that Island, and wondering whether the church had fallen off in my four years’ absence, when suddenly the voice of a song broke

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<sup>1</sup> John G. Paton and James Paton, *John G. Paton, Missionary to the New Hebrides. An Autobiography* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), 80.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth A Tucker, *From Jerusalem to Irian Jaya: A Biographical History of Christian Missions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1983), 215.

## Jesus Is Building His Church

on my ears! It was scarcely full dawn, yet I jumped up and called to a man that was passing, “Have I slept in? Is it already church-time? Or why are the people met so early?”

He was one of their leaders, and gravely replied, “Missi [the name given to Paton by the Islanders], since you left, we have found it very hard to live near to God! So the Chief and the Teachers and a few others meet when daylight comes on every Sabbath morning, and spend the first hour of every Lord’s Day in prayer and praise. They are met to pray for you now, that God may help you in your preaching, and that all hearts may bear fruit to the glory of Jesus this day.”<sup>3</sup>

Paton said that he returned to his room and felt wonderfully prepared. He also said that “on that day every person on the Island seemed to be at church, except the bedridden and the sick.”<sup>4</sup>

All around the world Jesus is building his church. I could tell you story after story of Jesus building his church in places where he is not known. I could tell you story after story of Jesus building his church in places where his name is commonly known.

### Lesson

But, if I were to ask you if it is important to study the doctrine of the church, which is known as “ecclesiology,” you might say that it is not important. In fact, surprisingly, the great Reformer, Martin Luther, did not think it was important to study the doctrine of the church. After all, he said, “studying the church is hardly necessary since even a child of seven knows what the church is.”<sup>5</sup>

Frankly, it is simply not true that every child of seven—or older, for that matter—knows what a church is. Oh, most people think of a church as a building, or as a collection of people who gather to worship, or something like that. But most people simply

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<sup>3</sup> Paton, 414.

<sup>4</sup> Paton, 414.

<sup>5</sup> Edmund P. Clowney, *Living in Christ’s Church* (Philadelphia, PA: Great Commission Publications, 1986), 7.

do not understand what the church is.

And so, today, I want to ask and answer the question, “What is the church?” It is important for us to understand that if Jesus is building his church, then we need to begin by understanding what the church is.

## I. The Church Is the Community of All True Believers for All Time

First, the church is the community of all true believers for all time.

The English word “church” is derived from the Greek word *ekklesia*. *Ekklesia* is really a combination of two Greek words: *ek*, which means “from” or “out of,” and *kaleo*, which means “to call out.” And so *ekklesia* means “a gathering of citizens called out from their homes into some public place, an assembly.”<sup>6</sup>

The definition for “church” suggested by Wayne Grudem is: “The church is the community of all true believers for all time.”<sup>7</sup> I think that this is a helpful definition.

The Apostle Paul said in Ephesians 5:25 that “Christ loved *the church* and gave himself up for her.” Paul uses the term “church” to refer to all those for whom Christ died, all those who are saved by the death of Christ.

The way Jesus is building his church is by adding to the church those people for whom he died. Jesus said, “**I will build my church**” (Matthew 16:18). And throughout the ages Jesus has added believers to his church.

Interestingly, Luke tells us in the book of Acts, which is a record of how Jesus was building his church shortly after his death and resurrection, that “*the Lord* added to their number day by day those who were being saved” (Acts 2:47).

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<sup>6</sup> James Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Showing Every Word of the Text of the Common English Version of the Canonical Books, and Every Occurrence of Each Word in Regular Order*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1996), G1577.

<sup>7</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), 853.

And the process by which Jesus is building his church in the New Testament is simply a continuation of the process by which he was building his church in the Old Testament.

When Moses told the people that the Lord said to him in Deuteronomy 4:10, “*Gather* the people to me, that I may let them hear my words. . .,” the Septuagint (which is a Greek translation of the Hebrew text) used the Greek verb form of *ekklesia*, which, of course, means “the church.” Many such similar instances occur in the Old Testament.

So it is not surprising then that the New Testament authors speak of the Old Testament people of Israel as the “church.” For example, the Stephen the Martyr speaks of “the congregation [*ekklesia*, church] in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38).

And so, the church is the community of all true believers for all time. Though the way Jesus was building his church in the Old Testament was different from the way in which he is building his church in the New Testament, it is appropriate to think of the church as the community of all true believers for all time.

## **II. The Church Is Invisible, Yet Visible**

Second, the church is invisible, yet visible.

Wayne Grudem says that “in its true spiritual reality as the fellowship of all genuine believers, the church is invisible.”<sup>8</sup> We cannot see what is going on in a person’s heart. Obviously, we can see those who attend a church service. We can even see the outward evidences of inward spiritual change. But we cannot actually see into people’s hearts and see their true spiritual state. Only God can do that. That is why the Apostle Paul says, “The Lord knows those who are his” (2 Timothy 2:19).

So, we can therefore say, “The invisible church is the church as God sees it.” This is consistent with what the *Westminster Confession of Faith* says about the church in its chapter on the

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 855.

church, “The catholic or universal Church, which is *invisible*, consists of the whole number of the elect, that have been, are, or shall be gathered into one, under Christ the Head thereof; and is the spouse, the body, the fullness of Him that filleth all in all.”<sup>9</sup>

Both Martin Luther and John Calvin were eager to affirm this invisible aspect of the church over against the Roman Catholic teaching that the church was the one visible organization that had descended from the apostles in an unbroken line of succession (through the bishops of the church). The Roman Catholic Church had argued that only in the visible organization of the Roman Church could we find the one true church, the only true church. Even today such a view is held by the Roman Catholic Church.

In fact, just last month, on July 10, 2007, the Roman Catholic Church released a document stating—once again—that it is the only true church. Among the points made, the Roman Catholic Church said that because the Christian “communities” born out of the Reformation of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (that would be us!) lacked apostolic succession and “sacramental priesthood,” they cannot be considered “churches” in “the proper sense.”<sup>10</sup>

Along with Luther and Calvin, we would disagree with that statement. The true church is not merely the outward form and organization, but it is the fellowship of all genuine believers.

On the other hand, the true church of Christ certainly has a visible aspect as well. So we can say, “The visible church is the church as Christians on earth see it.” In this sense the visible church includes all who profess faith in Christ and give evidence of that faith in their lives.

When the Apostle Paul writes his letters he writes them to the visible church in each community: “To the *church* of God that is in Corinth” (1 Corinthians 1:2); “To the *church* of the Thessalonians” (1 Thessalonians 1:1); “To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the

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<sup>9</sup> *The Westminster Confession of Faith* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996), Chapter XXV, 1.

<sup>10</sup> Edward E. Plowman, “Drawing Distinctions” in *WORLD Magazine*, July 28, 2007, Vol. 22, No. 27.

*church* in your house” (Philemon 1-2).

The visible church consists of all those who profess faith in Jesus. Some of those who profess faith may not be true believers because only Jesus sees the heart and knows those who are true believers. Yet Paul simply wrote to the entire church that met in a particular location.

The visible church will always include some who are not true believers, because we cannot see hearts as God sees them. Paul speaks of “Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth” and “are upsetting the faith of some” (2 Timothy 2:17-18). But he is confident that “the Lord knows those who are his” (2 Timothy 2:19).

The elders of the church have a responsibility to examine each person’s profession of faith before admitting that person into communicant membership. Of course, the elders are not omniscient and they cannot see the heart condition of each person. Nevertheless, they must use their best judgment to assess the credibility of each person’s faith before admitting that person into communicant membership.

When we recognize that not all persons in a church are believers there is a danger that we may become overly suspicious of others. We may begin to doubt the salvation of true believers and cause confusion even among the elect of Jesus’ church. Calvin warned of this danger by saying that we must make a “charitable judgment” whereby we recognize as members of the church all who “by confession of faith, by example of life, and by partaking of the sacraments, profess the same God and Christ with us.”<sup>11</sup>

We should not try to exclude people from the fellowship of the church until they sin publicly, refuse to repent of it, and thereby bring discipline upon themselves.

Nevertheless, when professing Christians refuse to repent of their sin and clearly demonstrate their incorrigibility, they ought to be disciplined and, if necessary, excommunicated from the visible

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<sup>11</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: 1960), 4.1.8.

church.

### III. The Church Is Local and Universal

And third, the church is local and universal.

In the New Testament the word “church” may be applied to a group of believers at any level, ranging from a very small group meeting in a private home all the way to the group of all true believers in the universal church.

For example, a small group met in a home in Rome, where Paul said, “Greet also *the church in their house*” (Romans 16:5). He also said to the Corinthians, “Aquila and Prisca, together with *the church in their house*, send you hearty greetings in the Lord” (1 Corinthians 16:5).

The church in an entire city is also called a “church.” Paul said in 2 Corinthians 1:1, “To *the church of God that is at Corinth*. . . .”

Sometimes the church in a region is called the “church.” We read in Acts 9:31, “So *the church* throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up.”

Finally, the church throughout the entire world can be referred to as the “church.” Paul said in Ephesians 5:25, “Christ loved *the church* and gave himself up for her.”

So, a group may be called a “church” whether they are a small group or the entire collection of professing believers.

There are some people today who say that the only true church is a church that meets in a house. They say that we need to get back to New Testament teaching about the church. And they mistakenly think that the only kind of church that existed in the New Testament was the kind that met in homes. Well, some churches did meet in homes, but clearly the New Testament teaches that there was a city church, a regional church, and even a universal church.

There are others who say that the local church is dead. They say that because local churches are no longer true churches—as

they understand what a true church is—that the people should no longer attend a local church. It is better to stay at home and listen to true Christian preaching on the radio—their radio station, of course. Well, this is no answer. To be sure, churches are more or less pure. It is the responsibility of every Christian to maintain the purity of the church. Therefore, Christians need to attend local churches that preach the true Word of God, observe the sacraments, and maintain church discipline.

### Conclusion

Let me close with a few points of application.

*First, recognize that the church is the community of all true believers for all time.* In a technical sense, the church started with Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, Jesus was building his church even in the Old Testament. We maintain that believers throughout the ages have all been saved in exactly the same way: by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. In the Old Testament, of course, the believers there did not know the name of Jesus. Nevertheless, they looked forward to his coming, and they were saved through trust in his future sacrifice on their behalf. When I die I will go to heaven and there I will meet believers from all the ages. If I were to ask Adam, “How were you saved?” he will say, “I was saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.” That is how Jesus has built throughout the ages.

*Second, members of the visible church are not necessarily members of the invisible church.* Only God sees the heart of each person. Only God knows those that are truly saved. Even though elders do their best job to make sure that they admit to the communicant membership of a local church only those who are true Christians, they are not infallible. So, being a member of a local church does not necessarily mean that one is a member of the invisible church. That is why Paul warns his readers in 2 Corinthians 13:5, “Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves.”

*And third, every professing Christian ought to be a member of a local church.* The writer to the Hebrews said in Hebrews 10:24-25: “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, *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.” A person who professes to be a Christian is not obedient to God if he or she is not active and participating in a local church. Just yesterday I heard a fisherman on the radio say, “I find that when I am out on the water catching fish, that is my church.” I wish I could say to that fisherman, “You may enjoy fishing, and you may also be enjoying God’s creation, but fishing out on the water is not ‘church.’” Every true believer ought to be active and involved in a local, visible body of true believers.

Franklin Clark Fry once said, “A person who says he believes in God but never goes to church is like a person who says he believes in education but never goes to school.”<sup>12</sup> So, if you call yourself a Christian, commit yourself to a local, visible body of true believers. Amen.

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<sup>12</sup> John Blanchard, *The Complete Gathered Gold : A Treasury of Quotations for Christians* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2006), 82.



# Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ  
and **membership** in his church family,  
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,  
equip them for their **ministry** in the church  
and life **mission** in the world,  
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

## Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

This sermon, and other sermons, by the Rev. Freddy Fritz can be found at:

1. [www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons](http://www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons)
2. [www.sermoncentral.com/contributor\\_profile.asp?ContributorID=11181](http://www.sermoncentral.com/contributor_profile.asp?ContributorID=11181)
3. [www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?SpeakerOnly=true&currSection=sermonsspeaker&keyword=Freddy%5EFritz](http://www.sermonaudio.com/search.asp?SpeakerOnly=true&currSection=sermonsspeaker&keyword=Freddy%5EFritz)

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**PRAAYER:**

Our Father, we thank you that Jesus is building his church. Thank you that Jesus is building his church here at the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church.

Help us to grow in our understanding of the church. We think we understand what the church, but there is so much that we don't fully understand.

I pray that you will show each true believer that he or she needs to be active and involved in a local, visible community of true believers. Glorify your name by the addition of new members, and strengthen every local church that Jesus is building.

And all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

**CHARGE:**

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

Blanchard, John. *The Complete Gathered Gold: A Treasury of Quotations for Christians*. Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2006.

Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994.