

We Are Church | Reading 1: Matthew 16:13-20

During Jesus' earthly ministry there was a constant debate about his identity. Everyone had their opinion. In this passage Jesus turns to his disciples & asks for their thoughts. No doubt they had listened to the views of others & discussed the subject among themselves. After asking them what others were saying Jesus asked them directly; **"who do you say that I am"**? Predictably Peter was the first one to speak, **"You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."** Jesus responded, **"Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. 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."**

This is the first time the word *church* shows up in our English NT. In these verses the church is predicted with absolute confidence by Jesus. **"I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."** On top of this Jesus said that he would build his church not so much on Peter but on the truth Peter confessed. When Jesus says, **"I tell you, you are Peter and on this rock I will build my church"**, the line contains a play on words. In the original language it reads like this; **"You are *petros* and on this *petra* I will build my church."** It would have sounded something like this. *"You are stone (small rock) and on this boulder (large rock) I will build my church."* Notice that Jesus did not say *"on you I will build my church"* but **"on this rock..."** Peter is not, in himself, the rock of the church. The NT teaches emphatically that Jesus alone is the cornerstone of his Church. Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 3:11; **"For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Christ Jesus."** Ephesians 2:20 says we are **"built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone."**

The cornerstone or foundation of the church Jesus predicted would be that *Jesus is the Messiah... the Son of the living God...* This is still the foundation today. This is the Rock that endures throughout all generations. This is the cornerstone of what Jesus is building today – a *movement* based on the truth that he is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. He's not building an institution based on church tradition, cultural identity, denominational loyalty, human personality, contemporary values or ecclesiastical hierarchy. He's building a community-assembly-congregation-movement based on the truth that he is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

The word translated church is *ekklesia*. Technically *church* is not the best way to translate it... The term *ekklesia* was not a religious term. It could refer to citizens called out to gather for civic purposes. It was also used to refer to soldiers called out to gather for military purposes. An *ekklesia* generally was a gathering of people called out for a specific purpose. This is what church is. *Ekklesia* never referred to a specific place, only a specific gathering or a specific people.

Jesus' listeners may also have been familiar with this term from another context as well. The Greek translation of the OT, describes the ancient Israelites as an *ekklesia*. Importantly, when the Jews were

scattered around the world, they were still known collectively as an *ekklesia*... While dispersed, the people of Israel gathered in close-knit communities & established synagogues. Each community of God's people called itself a synagogue – the local gathering of God's people – a little *ekklesia*. They understood themselves to be a local, literal gathering of people who were also members of the broad, spiritual gathering known as Israel. Keep that idea in your mind. All this helps to lay the ground work for the Church Jesus predicted & promised. In both secular & sacred literature, *ekklesia* always referred to a gathering of people united by a common identity & purpose. It never referred to a location. So, when Jesus used the term, his Jewish disciples understood him as saying, *"I am going to build my own assembly of people & the foundation for this new assembly will be ME, for I am the Messiah – the Christ – the Son of the living God!"*

Reading 2: Ephesians 3:7-11. I want to point out something else about how an *ekklesia* would have been understood in NT times.

In Ephesus & other Roman cities, the word *ekklesia* was used to refer to a group of people called out, either by election or appointment, to be responsible for the well being of a city! Think of a town council & your edging towards the idea. This is close to how this word was understood in the context of Ephesus. So when this letter was written it would have sounded like Paul was referring to Christians as the town council.

Now imagine you are one of the groups of Christians Paul is writing to. To help us get the impact imagine Paul wrote to us in Westport saying; *"you are the town council"*. We would think he was crazy, but that is exactly how it would have sounded to the people of Ephesus! Of course we also need to carefully note that when Paul was again writing to the Ephesians (& Timothy...) he defined them more specifically as ***"the church (the *ekklesia*) of the living God"*** (1 Tim 3:15). By using this word *ekklesia* in a context like Ephesus Paul was telling these people they were the ones called out, elected & appointed by God to be responsible for the wellbeing of the city they lived in. He was in a sense telling them they were the most important people in town & he was telling them they were responsible for their cities wellbeing. He was telling them their status before God & their responsibility to the city, which were wrapped up together.

Of course they were not to undermine the official *ekklesia* of the city but rather as the *ekklesia* of God work with them were possible for the good of the city... But they also had a very distinct purpose. They were called to be a pillar & buttress of truth in their city (1 Tim 3:15). They were to confess Christ to their city (1 Tim 3:16). They were to make known the manifold wisdom of God in their city (Eph 3:10). This is why they were called to gather together. This is one reason the writer of Hebrews wrote; 10:23-25 ***"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 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.” It is not only for our own good that we meet together, it’s also for the good of the community we live.

These words were not only written for the Ephesians & the Hebrews they were also written for us, to us & about us. We are an ekklesia of God in Westport & we are part of the global ekklesia of God. We exist to pray & live & work towards the welfare of the area God has us in with the gifting God has given us. This is our responsibility; this is what being a church means. This is why we have been called out & set apart. This is why we have been elected by God as his ekklesia. This is why God give us his vote... This is why we continue gathering together (without wavering)...

If you where elected to the town council you wouldn’t just show up to meetings when it suits you, you would make it you priority to be at every council meeting? You would see it as a privilege. Well we are the ekklesia of God & we have a responsibility to meet together for the welfare of the community. Church isn’t a location we go to or a meeting we attend, it’s who we are by grace & we are so for the good of the world around us. Church is who we are called out & called together in Christ to be.

Let me try & tie all this up & apply it to where we’re at right now.

This part of Ireland needs a consistent & committed Christ-centred, Bible-based, Spirit-led ekkesia. Your local area, village or town needs a consistent & committed Christ-centred, bible-based, Spirit-led ekklesia. This is why I see a vision for gathering together like this on a Sunday... & this is why I see a vision of meeting in different homes as Life Groups during the week. On a Sunday we gather together & during the week we gather in our local areas. Paul said to the Ephesians Elders in Acts 20:20; **“I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public and from house to house.”** On a Sunday we gather together here publically as a church family & during the week we take church to as many locations as possible. Church is not a single location we travel to, it is a movement that can travel wherever God leads or open doors. It is a movement that goes wherever we go because we are church. That what church was in the NT & that’s what real church will be until Christ comes again & gathers us all together as his bride. Church is not dependant on a building; it is dependent on people committed to meeting & working together for the gospel. It’s dependent on people taking Jesus call & entrusted responsibility seriously. Any building we have should be viewed as a mission station not the church...

Here’s a simple vision - one church many locations! During the week God has us scattered across different areas for a reason! Can you help us start a Life Group in your area – a mini Christ-centred, Bible-based, Spirit-led ekklesia? Who gather to provide Christian fellowship & to pray & work towards the wellbeing of the community you live in with a firm commitment to the gospel! A gathering which becomes a constant & committed pillar holding up the gospel in your community, where Christ is confessed, where the manifold wisdom of God is made known?

Jesus said to Peter **“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.”** Do you know that promise is not only for Peter but for all who confess who Christ is & it is linked to our confession of Christ! The keys of the kingdom do not belong to popes, bishops or pastors only, but to all who testify that Jesus is Messiah & Son of the living God. You can be a testimony for God in your family, job or school... Your home or Life group can become a testimony for God in your community... Every time we confess Christ we open the door to the kingdom of heaven. Every time we meet like this in his name we open a door to the kingdom of heaven in Westport. Every time we gather in Life Group’s or in any fashion we open doors to the kingdom of heaven in different parts of this town & county. That’s the vision I see - more & more doors opening to the kingdom across this part of Ireland as people open their lives & homes so little gatherings are established in as many locations as possible...

Your home could become an open door to the kingdom of heaven in your area. Such truth should have us all cueing to host or pioneer or at least be part of a Life Group’s in our local area. And it should have all of us at least committed to being at one as much as possible. The truth of this should spell the end of struggling Life Group’s & the start of thriving ones. You should be there to help the witness & to pray for your community. It’s your responsibility before God & to the area he has you in. Life groups should become places; where as well as discussing the Bible we discuss how to reach our community. Vision should be birthed & events should be planned etc. They should be prophetic places just like Sunday mornings should be as well as any other gatherings organised in Christ’s name.

No one person can reach this whole area on his alone, but we can all begin by committing to meet together where we are & I believe if we meet with holy intention & gospel focus God will birth things out of such gatherings. We are not a location; we are not a single meeting on a Sunday, we are a flexible & dynamic movement of people with the potential to reach into many areas as the Spirit leads us. We are an ekklesia of God & we exist for the eternal good of every individual & community in this area...

Church is not a place or meeting we go to once a week; it is something we are a part of everyday! Church is not about controlling people but releasing people in accountable ways to fulfil their part in Christ’s mission! Church is not the job of the pastor or clergy it’s the responsibility of every believer! Church is not something we turn up at it’s something we take with us everywhere we go. Church is not only what we’re doing this morning, church is who we are tomorrow morning! And church is the only movement Jesus has promised to build & therefore nothing can stop our advance.