

# The Church: Christ's Possession

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## **Text:**

Matthew 16:13-20

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 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. 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. 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." Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

Ephesians 5:25-33

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. In the same way husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as Christ does the church, because we are members of his body. "Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church. However, let each one of you love his wife as himself, and let the wife see that she respects her husband.

## **Introduction:**

This is the fourth sermon in a series on the church. We have been asking the question: "What does it mean to belong to the church?" We have looked at the Church as a place of peace, as God's school, and as God's fellowship. Today we are going to think about the Church as Christ's possession. The church belongs to Christ. It is made up of people who understand that they belong to Christ and who have willingly entered into a covenantal relationship with him and with others who share their faith, and who have signified their willingness to so do by baptism.

You may have been surprised that the majority of the texts that we have studied so far come from the Gospels. One of the conventional questions about the church that is often asked is: "When did the

church begin?” Not everyone agrees on the answer to that question, but the most frequent answer is the day of Pentecost. This is not altogether false, but we would have a truncated view of what the Church is if we saw it as a totally new thing that suddenly came into existence on the day of Pentecost. It is better to think of Pentecost as the end of a process. When we do that we will see that the Gospels have a lot to say to us about the church. They especially underline the central point that we are trying to establish; that the church belongs to Christ. So let’s look at that process together this morning by seeing how it happened historically in the Gospels and then seeing parallels in our own experience. I am going to divide the process by which the church came into being into five steps, all of which relate directly to the work of Jesus Christ. They are:

- Christ called or assembled his Church
- Christ taught his church
- Christ redeemed his church
- Christ commissioned his church
- Christ empowered his church

Now I have stated all of these steps in the past tense, but we could also use the present tense because what Christ did in the Gospels he continues to do. What was true for his disciples in the Gospels is still true for us. When we read the Gospels we can always put ourselves in the place of the disciples. As they were his followers, his church, in the first century, so we are in our century. What Christ did for them then, he does for us now. Once we realize this we find that the Gospels are filled with instructions for the church, even though, technically, they refer to a time period before the church, as such, existed. This is the reason that in the passage we read from Matthew Jesus refers to the church in the future tense when he says: “I will build my church.”

## **I. The Church Called or Assembled**

The very word “church” comes from a compound Greek word which means “called out”. Christ’s church begins with his call. The first thing we see him doing once he begins his public ministry in the Gospels is calling disciples. His call is simple. He says: “follow me”, and those whom he calls leave whatever they are doing and follow him. There is no case in the Gospels where Christ extends that call that the person called does otherwise. There are, on the other hand, examples of individuals who, of their own will, seek to follow Christ only to turn back and not follow through, but those whom Christ calls follow.

This remains an accurate picture of the Church. It is the assembly of those who have heard the call of Christ. This is the thing that brings us together. As we saw in the last study it is the basis of our fellowship; Christ has called, and we have answered. Like Peter, Andrew, James and John we have laid down our nets to follow Christ. Wherever the Church exists truly, it exists by the divine will. God has acted first in Christ he has called us. We “love him because he first loved us.” We follow him because he called us.

## II. The Church taught by Christ

We have already looked at the Church as God's school, the place where we are taught the way of Christ. In the Gospels once Jesus called disciples he began to teach them. This is evident in the Gospel of Matthew where, in the opening passage of the ministry of Jesus at the end of chapter 4, he calls his first disciples. In chapter 5 he then takes them up into a mountain and begins to teach them. The next three chapters (5-7) contain the best known passage of Jesus' teachings, the Sermon on the Mount. Now of course these teaching were not just for the first disciples. We have already seen that Jesus instructed those first disciples to make disciples of all the nations and to teach them everything that he had taught them.

This pattern of the Gospels holds true for us. Those whom Christ calls he instructs. We are his followers. He has called us to walk in his ways. We see this pattern, for example, in the great invitation Jesus gives in Matthew 11 when he says: "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest." He follows this invitation with: "Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." In Judaism "taking the yoke" symbolized submitting to the demands of the law. The law was a hard yoke, but Jesus says that learning from him "brings rest to our souls."

When we examine the teaching of the New Testament Epistles we find that everything the Apostles taught the Church was rooted and grounded in the teachings of Jesus. To be called of Christ is only the beginning. Christ calls us that he might teach us his way, in order that we might find rest for our souls, or as he says in John 15:11: "that his joy might be in us, and that our joy might be full."

## III. The Church Redeemed by Christ

If we were to consider the Church only to be those who had heard the call of Christ and who were following the teachings of Christ, we would miss the most important fact about it. While the present point comes third in chronological order, logically it is first. This is the reason that Jesus spoke of building his Church in the future tense. The church cannot properly exist until it has been purchased. Christ purchased his Church, his Bride, by redeeming her through his death on her behalf. Jesus told his disciples as they neared Jerusalem that he had not come to "be served, but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many" (Matthew 28:20). This was his primary purpose for coming into the world. The Apostle Paul emphasizes this in the second text we have read this morning where he says: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to

himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish” (Ephesians 5:13-14).

This is the reason the Church is, first and foremost, the assembly of the redeemed. We are those who confess ourselves to be lost and hopeless sinners, who have been rescued from death and damnation by the redeeming death of Jesus Christ. This is the reason that our central ongoing act is what we call communion, or the Lord’s Supper where by broken bread we bear witness to Christ’s body broken for us, and by the cup we proclaim his blood, shed on our behalf as the foundation of the new covenant.

#### **IV. The Church Commissioned by Christ**

As the Church of Jesus Christ, we are those who have been called by Christ, taught by Christ, redeemed by Christ, and also those who have been given a mission by Christ. Our mission, simply put, is to continue and to finish his work in the world. In the Gospel of John, after the resurrection, Jesus appears to the disciples and says: “Peace be unto you; as the Father has sent me so send I you” (John 20:21). We have already looked at Matthew 28:19-20 where Jesus tells his disciples to go and make disciples of all nations. He has called us for a reason. What he has taught us we must teach others. We are ambassadors of Christ. When we lose sight of our mission we become something less than the Church of Christ. The world desperately needs the good news of salvation and new life through Christ. We as his church are the instrument through which he is working to bring that good news to the world.

#### **V. The Church Empowered by Christ**

Finally, as we reach the end, we come back to the beginning. Pentecost is the final piece of the puzzle. It is so important that Jesus told the disciples before ascending into heaven: “Wait in Jerusalem until you are endued with power from on high” (Luke 24:49). This is what they did and the account of the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 is the account of what happened when they were endued with power from on high. The mission that we have been given is a divine mission that can only be accomplished by divine power. Therefore, as the Church of Christ, we are always a people who see to do the work of Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit. All that is not empowered of the Spirit is doomed to failure.