

MATTHEW 16:13-19

KEYS TO THE KINGDOM

“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.’”¹

The responsibility of Christians to seek church membership is a woefully neglected teaching; consequently, membership in the local congregation is a neglected practise among evangelical churches. Perhaps this situation results from an exaggerated emphasis on individuality within contemporary culture. Regrettably, the greater our emphases upon individuality, the more individuals appear to have been mass-produced. Despite the popularity of avowing individual uniqueness, we seem often to gravitate toward a bland homogenisation that ensures a dull sameness throughout society. However, I suspect that church membership is not practised because preachers neglect to provide a biblical foundation for the doctrine.

Does Christ expect His people to “join” a church? Or does God add to a church? Are people automatically members of a great, universal church because of the new birth? Should Christians deliberately unite with a local congregation where God appoints them? Is the church a political organisation? Or is the church a dynamic, living organism? These are serious questions that should occupy the attention of each Christian.

I contend that church membership is not only biblical; it is anticipated and expected of each one who names the Name of Christ the Lord. In the local congregation, individual believers are expected to fulfil Christ’s mandate to worship, to evangelise, and to build believers through investment of spiritual gifts given to each saint.

A church adhering to the New Testament model is to be composed only of people who are twice born—infants and the unsaved are not to be admitted into congregational membership. Perhaps it is more accurate to state that God adds to the church instead of saying that people join a church. We dare not coerce people into uniting with the church; but rather people are invited and encouraged to declare openly their union with the people of God. Those entering into the church are expected to accept joyfully the responsibility to fulfil ministries assigned by the Spirit who appoints each of us to the congregation.

Uniting with a congregation, a Christians demonstrates acceptance of Christ’s appointment. Today, we are exploring church membership at greater length through consideration of Jesus’ words as recorded in Matthew’s Gospel. It is not merely listing one’s name on a church roll that is in view, but rather the focus is accepting responsibility as Christians to participate in the ongoing work of building the Kingdom of God.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from **The Holy Bible: English Standard Version**. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers, 2001. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Jesus had recently been teaching His followers about the Kingdom of God. In **MATTHEW 13**, He spoke of the Kingdom at least twelve times; and in the present chapter, He continues to speak of the Kingdom. The existence of a kingdom implies that all who enter that kingdom accept the reign of the ruler of the kingdom. If the Kingdom of God exists—and I am confident that it does exist—it should be apparent that God must be ruler of that Kingdom. Jesus presented Himself as the King, and those entering into His Kingdom accept His rule over their lives. This knowledge is important if we will fully understand Jesus’ meaning in our text. We will consider this pericope as our text, though the focus is primarily on Jesus’ statement recorded in **VERSE EIGHTEEN**. Therefore, I invite you to open your Bibles to this passage, so that together we can discover all that God would teach us this day.

THE COMPOSITION OF THE CHURCHES — “On this rock I will build my church.” What do you suppose Jesus meant by those words? Jesus’ saying is well known throughout all Christendom. Undoubtedly, His words have occasioned considerable debate; they have served in some instances as foundation for formulating primary doctrinal emphases for denominations. Assuredly, they have stimulated vigorous debate within the Christian community for two millennia.

Catholic apologists contend that with these words, Jesus consecrated Peter as the first Pope. It is helpful to realise that prior to 1560, even Catholic views of the meaning of Jesus’ words were amazingly diverse.² The present unity that is witnessed among Catholic theologians likely has more to do with reaction to Protestantism than to improved scholarship.

Protestant theologians, from Luther onward, have rejected the Catholic view—as much out of antipathy as out of conviction, it seems to me. To this day, Protestants stand united in rejecting the Catholic position as a misrepresentation of Jesus’ intent. Since Luther’s day, alternative interpretations have been vigorously advanced.

Jesus almost certainly spoke Aramaic, though this Gospel is presented in Greek. In either language, there is a play on words. In Aramaic, “Peter” and “rock” are the same word; in Greek, the two words are cognate terms that were used interchangeably during this period.³ Some of you have perhaps been taught that there is a distinction between “Peter” [**Petros**] and “rock” [**petra**], but grammar requires this variation because the ending of **petra** is feminine and could not therefore be used for a man’s name. The Aramaic would have used **kepha** in either instance, in which case the problem disappears altogether.⁴

Multiple views concerning the meaning of Jesus’ words have been advanced and positions have hardened as churches attempted to justify their own particular practices.⁵ Let’s consider just a few of the variant positions before continuing our study.

² Craig Blomberg, in **The New American Commentary: Matthew, Vol. 22** (Broadman & Holman, Nashville, TN 2001) 252, cites as an example, J. E. Bigane III in **Faith, Christ or Peter: Matthew 16:18 in Sixteenth Century Roman Catholic Exegesis** (UPA, Washington, DC 1981)

³ See Craig S. Keener, **The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament** (InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL 1993) 90

⁴ Blomberg, op cit.

⁵ For a review of the various positions advanced throughout history, see William Barclay, **The Daily Study Bible: The Gospel of Matthew (Volume 2), Revised Edition** (Westminster Press, Philadelphia, PA 1975) 140-141

Early on, Augustine took the “rock” to refer to Jesus himself. It is as if Jesus said, “You are Peter; and on myself as rock I will found my Church; and the day will come when, as the reward of your faith, you will be great in the church.” Theological precedence for this position is afforded by the fact that God is spoken of as the Rock of Israel [e.g. DEUTERONOMY 32:31]. Of course, we are taught to build our house upon the rock [MATTHEW 7:25], indicating that life is to be established on Christ. Also, Jesus presented Himself as “the stone that the builders rejected” which became the “cornerstone” [MATTHEW 21:42]. Among noted apologists that adopted this view is included Dr. James Montgomery Boice, formerly pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia.⁶

Some apologists are convinced that the truth that Jesus is the Son of the Living God is the rock on which Jesus’ church is founded. Jesus did commend Peter because this truth was revealed to him and he openly expressed it. Jesus Christ *is* the cornerstone of the Faith; but that hardly seems to bring out the play on the words found in the text.

Others have explained that Peter’s faith is the rock of which Jesus spoke. His faith would serve to bring the church into existence when impelled by the Spirit he would speak at Pentecost, becoming God’s instrument to turn many Jews to faith.

A variant of this position considers that Peter’s confession of Christ is the “rock” and that each individual who enters into the Faith must make this confession of faith. This particular view enjoys ancient warrant. The noted Baptist scholar, John Broadus, cites Chrysostom as saying, “On this rock; that is, on the faith of his confession... He did not say upon Peter, for it was not upon man, but upon his faith.” He also cites Gregory of Nyssa and Isidore of Pelusium, and the Latin father, Hilary, in addition to the Greek fathers Theodoret, Theophanes, Theophylact, and John of Damascus.⁷

Stepping back momentarily from the ancient battle between Protestants and Catholics—Baptists never were Protestants, having nothing to protest—it seems likely that Jesus did intend to designate Peter as the rock of which He spoke. However, we need to understand in what way Peter was that rock. To acknowledge that Peter was the rock does not make the claim of the papacy credible; for that to be true would require an entire set of propositions to be proven that are otherwise unproven and unsustainable.

This passage represents the first time that Jesus used the term “church.” We tend to think of the church as an institution—an organisation with buildings and offices and services and meetings. The Aramaic word Jesus would have used is **qāhāl**, which is the word used in the Old Testament for the congregation of Israel—the gathering of the People of the Lord. In the Greek language, that word is **ekklesia** from **ekkaleō**, meaning, “to call out.” Our Lord was saying to Peter that he was the beginning of the new Israel, the new people of the Lord, the new fellowship of those believing on His Name. Peter was the first to both understand who Jesus was and to declare openly that truth.

People get into trouble when they ascribe to word pictures more than the picture can support. The Bible frequently employs picturesque language in order to make one definite point. One word picture frequently used for the church is a “building.” However, that word picture represents many points of view. Here, Peter is spoken of as the foundation for the church in the sense that he was the first person to believe.

⁶ See James Montgomery Boice, **The Gospel of Matthew: Volume 1, The King and His Kingdom: Matthew 1-17** (Baker, Grand Rapids, MI 2001) 306

⁷ Cited in John A. Broadus, **An American Commentary on the New Testament: Matthew** (Judson Press, Valley Forge, PA 1886) 356

To understand Jesus' meaning, we should perhaps ask how Peter—the disciple whom Jesus addressed—understood these words concerning “the rock.” If we can discover this, we will be furthered in understanding of Christ's intent in using this term. In **1 PETER 2:4-8** we gain insight into Peter's understanding. “As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture:

‘Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious,
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.’

So the honour is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe,

‘The stone that the builders rejected
has become the cornerstone,’

and

‘A stone of stumbling,
and a rock of offence.’”

Peter knew that Jesus was the Rock, but he also humbly accepted that he was the first to recognise Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. He did not think himself superior in any way to the remainder of the apostles. After all, “the foundation” of the household of God is “the apostles and prophets” [**EPHESIANS 2:20**]. Nevertheless, Peter saw himself as a stone in the house of God. He did not think himself greater than any of the people of the Lord, for all alike are living stones in the House of the Lord.

In the passage we just read, Peter states, “you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house” [**VERSE FIVE**]. Every person who confesses the same truth that Peter professed when Christ inquired about the perception of the people, shares in the same blessing of being included as part of the building God creates. If you believe that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” you also are included as a building block in the house of God. You have a place in the church where Christ places you, a place promised and assured because you have believed in the Christ.

Jesus is not speaking of a particular church structure, and He is certainly not speaking of a denomination or sect. Rather, He promises that He will establish a gathered community of His followers and He will help them grow. It should be evident that churches are not dependent upon Peter, though the first church did begin with Peter.

The message to take away is that only those who confess Jesus' identity are fit to be part of the building of God. Only those who recognise Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God, have a place in the household of faith. Only those who are born from above belong in the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who are saved have a place in the church of the Living God. If there is one truth that should penetrate our minds, it is that only the redeemed of the Lord have a place in the church of the Lord.

I stress this truth because it is too easily neglected. Our experience induces us to treat the church into which Christ has settled us as merely another political organisation. Government treats it as such and from childhood, we are trained to emphasise individual rights; thus, we are induced to take liberties with the church of Christ the Lord.

However, we must never think that the church is simply a political entity; it is a living entity built up of “living stones”—men and women who are twice born. Though an individual may have his or her name included on a church roll, one cannot be a part of the church until he or she has not been born from above. However, it is obvious that those “living stones” that have resisted accepting or refused to accept Christ’s placement in a church of His choice are failing to fulfil the intent of the Master.

From earliest days, Baptists have held to the New Testament teaching that the churches of our Lord are to be made up only of regenerate people. Consider a couple of quotes from Baptist leaders who served during an earlier era. John Broadus, noted Baptist scholar, wrote, “We hold that a Christian Church ought to consist only of persons making a credible profession of conversion, of faith in Christ. These may include children, even comparatively young children, for God be thanked that these do often give credible evidence of faith in Christ! But in the very nature of the case, they cannot include infants. The notion that infants may be church-members because their parents are seems to us utterly alien to the genius of Christianity, not only unsupported by the New Testament, but in conflict with its essential principles.”⁸

Another divine wrote, “No person can become a member of a Baptist church, till he professes to have found the remission of sins, by faith in the merits of our Lord Jesus Christ... [When] you are regenerated from above, it is your duty to be baptised, and your privilege to be baptised, and by that act to declare that, you are already a renewed man. And because you are not ‘dead indeed unto sin, and alive unto righteousness,’ you ‘must be *buried* with Christ in baptism.’ just as Christ was first buried in the waters of the Jordan, and then in the tomb of Joseph; that like as he was raised again by the glory of the father, even so should ye walk in newness of life... [T]his is the reason that we *immerse* men, because when men are ‘buried,’ they are covered in the tomb. This is what we understand by burying a believer ‘with Christ in baptism.’”⁹

THE CONTINUATION OF THE CHURCHES — “The gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Scholars have long argued about what Jesus meant by the term “rock,” just as they continually speculate about what He meant by “the gates of hell.” Whatever conclusion an individual draws, we must always bear in mind the occasion for Jesus’ words. Jesus was leading His disciples to acknowledge Him. That focus helps us to remember what is at stake and it ensures that we will hear what the disciples heard as Jesus spoke.

Two thoughts predominate among those seeking to discover what Jesus meant. The majority view seems to be that Jesus spoke of spiritual warfare. Many fine scholars think that in this account, Jesus gives a promise that Satan and his cohorts will not ultimately prevail. Christians *are* engaged in warfare [e.g. **EPHESIANS 6:10-20**], but the outcome of our war is already determined. Though specific battles may be lost, we are assured that the conflict in which we are engaged has already been won.

⁸ John A. Broadus, **The Duty of Baptists to Teach Their Distinctive Views** (American Baptist Publication Society, Philadelphia, PA 1880) 6-7

⁹ Thomas Armitage, **Baptist Faith and Practice** (C. R. Barnes Publishing Co., St. Louis, MO 1890) 40-41

If this is the meaning, then the statement Jesus makes is less concerned with defence than it is with offence. Jesus would not then be saying that we are to wait until attacked by the wicked one, but rather He would be encouraging us to carry the war to the enemy, to be aggressive in pursuing righteousness. His words would need to be taken as a statement promising success in evangelistic effort, and ultimately in Kingdom growth. Admittedly, the imagery of warfare associated with evangelism would appear strange.

Rather than focusing on the gates, I prefer to focus on what lies behind the gates. The term “gates of Hades” appears in biblical literature [e.g. **JOB 17:16; 38:17; PSALM 9:13**], and also in Jewish literature [cf. **WISDOM OF SOLOMON 16:13; PSALMS OF SOLOMON 16:2**]¹⁰ that would have been available to readers of that day. Reading the biblical references and reviewing the noncanonical literature reveals that the term addresses death and dying instead of conflict with evil. It seems likely to me that our Lord was saying that because His people are redeemed from death that the Faith itself cannot die.

It is precisely the promise that Christ is alive that gives us hope in the face of overwhelming odds. I may lose one battle, but Christ is the ultimate victor. Let me explain so that each of us may be fully encouraged. I may lose a battle by beginning to doubt my place in the Body of Christ, but Christ is victor and together with the Psalmist, I can rejoice in the knowledge that “my times are in [His] hand” [**PSALM 31:15**].

Perhaps I fail to live the righteous life that I inwardly long to exhibit, but I know that because Christ lives that He will nevertheless receive me and He will forgive me, just as He has promised. We are confident that “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” [**1 JOHN 1:9**].

Perhaps I fail egregiously in my conduct and bring disgrace on the church wherein Christ has placed me. Because Christ lives and because death shall not prevail, I know that when I look for mercy I will find it among the people of God. There, where the Body of Christ works and fulfils all that Christ has appointed it to do, I will witness the fullness of Christ at work and receive goodness and mercy through that Body.

The church is not so much an organisation as it is a living entity. This is the reason it is spoken of as the Body of Christ [e.g. **EPHESIANS 1:23; 5:23; COLOSSIANS 1:24**]. Because the Head of the Body—Christ the Lord—lives, the Body lives and performs all that He commands. Though we are broken and sinful beings, He is at work among us, always performing the glorious work that will ultimately bring glory to His Name.

This gracious and holy work can never be carried out if unregenerate people populate the congregation. This is the reason that we insist on a regenerate church membership. Though unsaved people may claim membership in the assembly, when it becomes evident that they are unsaved, it is the responsibility of the congregation to hold them to account. Hold in mind that it is incumbent upon the members of the assembly to hold to account those who profess the Name of Christ.

No one is to be admitted into membership in a New Testament Church until he gives a credible testimony of faith. Believers are responsible to identify as such through obedience to Christ’s command to be baptised. Those who are not believers are obligated to withdraw from fellowship until such time that they receive the message of life; or else it is the responsibility of the church to hold them accountable, calling them to faith.

¹⁰ Cf. **The Apocrypha according to the Authorized Version** (Oxford University Press, London, UK) and Rutherford H. Platt, Jr., **The Forgotten Books of Eden** (World Publishing, New York, NY 1927) 116

THE CLEANSING OF THE CHURCHES — “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.” However much Protestant theologians may wish that our Lord had used the plural pronoun [**humeîs**], He did use the singular pronoun [**soi**]. There can be no question but that He addressed Peter concerning “keys to the Kingdom of Heaven.” However, this does not mean that Peter had sole authority to bind and loose.

All disciples are to be “fishers of men” [**MATTHEW 4:19**]. All disciples are to be “salt” [**MATTHEW 5:13**] and “light” [**MATTHEW 5:14-16**]. All disciples are responsible to proclaim the good news of the Kingdom [**MATTHEW 10:6-42**]. Since the resurrection, all disciples are responsible to fulfil the Great Commission—to disciple all nations, teaching all that Christ has commanded [**MATTHEW 28:18-20**]. Within Matthew’s Gospel, then, the commands given are incumbent upon all disciples, and this command is no different.

Upon confessing Christ as the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, Peter was told that he had received the keys to the Kingdom. Just so, as you receive the revelation of truth and confess Christ as Lord, so you also receive the keys to the Kingdom. In fact, as the church evangelises together, builds one another in this Most Holy Faith and worships the Risen Son of God, so together, we exercise the authority of keys of the Kingdom. We have no direct pipeline to Heaven; we do not have power to force Heaven to comply with our decisions. However, we do have authority to declare what Heaven has already declared; and thus we usher into the Kingdom those who believe and through the same witness, those who refuse to believe have been excluded from the Kingdom.

Peter would not add to the Kingdom those who believed as he preached at Pentecost, but those who received his word would nevertheless be added to the church [**ACTS 2:42, 47**]. The Risen Lord added believers; Jesus was building His church. In the same way, as we witness and as we declare the truth of the Living Christ, those who believe will openly confess their faith and we witness repeatedly the keys being used to open the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus continues to build His church.

Negatively, whenever people refuse to believe, they are excluded from the Kingdom of Heaven. When Paul and Barnabas spoke boldly of the Risen Christ in Antioch of Pisidia only to have the most of the Jews reject that message, the Apostle charged them as having thrust the message of life aside and judging themselves unworthy of eternal life [see **ACTS 13:46**]. Just so, whenever we preach today and listeners leave without making a decision for life and for Christ, they exclude themselves from the Kingdom of Heaven. We bind and we loose through exercise of the ministry Christ has given us as a church; but we can only bind and loose what has already been bound and loosed in Heaven. Those ushered into the Kingdom and those excluded from the Kingdom have already been included through obedience to the Gospel or they have been excluded through disobedience to the message of life. Jesus is building His church.

MATTHEW 18:15-20 is a specialised application of Jesus’ teaching in our text. Church discipline is simply application in a specialised context of the employment of the keys of the Kingdom. Those within the Kingdom are subject to Kingdom oversight. Such oversight is not arbitrary; rather, it is a consistent application of the will of Christ. Discipline was not solely under the purview of the Apostles, but elders and ultimately the entire congregation are responsible before God to exercise oversight in matters of discipline [see **1 CORINTHIANS 5:1-13; 2 CORINTHIANS 13:10; TITUS 2:15; 3:10, 11**].

Jesus was not concerned with whether decisions Peter might make—or whether decisions a congregation might make—are infallible; there is no suggestion of such a concept in His words. Rather Jesus here defines the role disciples must play within the Kingdom of Heaven. We are subjects of Christ the King, and as His loyal subjects, we are responsible to ensure that we honour Him in all things, beginning with obedience to His command to identify openly as belonging to Him. We are to continue in the grace we have received, honouring Him through a righteous life and through godliness in every action we perform and with every word we speak. When we walk contrary to the grace we have received, the congregation to which we belong is charged with the responsibility of holding us accountable. Disciples have been entrusted with the keys to the Kingdom, and through those same disciples, Christ is even now building His church.

A church disciplines its own; it cannot discipline those outside the congregation—it cannot discipline the unregenerate, the unsaved. The discipline demanded does not seek to punish, but rather discipline seeks to restore errant brothers and sisters. This is an important point since it emphasises the need for a believers' church. Those who have never been born from above are simply recognised through being exposed by their conduct and they are to be excluded because their behaviour ultimately reveals their true character. The child of God will respond to loving discipline by turning again to honour the Lord of the Kingdom. Those who never were part of the Kingdom will reject Christ's reign and endeavour to justify their own self-willed pursuits.

Do you belong to the Kingdom of Heaven? Have you been born from above? Where has Christ your Master settled you? Are you serving in the place He placed you? This is an invitation to all who receive this message. Undoubtedly, it is an invitation to believe the Good News that Christ died because of your sin, that He was buried and was raised from the dead by the power of the Father. Believe that He has provided a perfect sacrifice in your place and receive the life that He now offers.

This is the Word of God. "If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved... For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'" [ROMANS 10:9, 10, 13]. Believe and be saved. Openly confess that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God, and become His subject today.

You who are saved, since believing have you openly identified as a member of the Kingdom of Heaven? Have you identified with Christ in baptism since believing? We invite all who are Christians to confess their faith openly through accepting Christ's command as a believer to be baptised.

You who are saved and baptised, where has Christ appointed you to serve? Christians are saved to serve; they are not saved in order to waste Christ's gifts through squandering them on their own desires. To which assembly do you belong? Is this the congregation where He would set you? Come; fulfil the ministry Christ has assigned you here among the people of God.

Whatever the response the Spirit demands of you, make it today, make it now. Come, to receive Christ as Lord, to confess His reign over your life, to unite openly with His people. Come now, and may angels attend you as you come. Amen.