

# What is "Church"?

## House or People?

The first mention of "Church" in the NT is found in Matthew: "And I tell you, you are Peter[1], and on this rock[2] I will build my[6] church[3], and the gates of hell[7] shall not prevail against it[4]."[5] **Matthew 16:18, ESV.** In this one short sentence, Christ gives us a LOT of information before we even ask the following questions.

### What is it built on?

What Christ is saying here is that Peter's previous response in v.16 "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" is the claim on which He will build His "church". His church is going to be built on the profession of faith by people of every tongue and nation that Jesus Christ is the Son of the living God and that His Gospel message is the only way to be eternally in His presence.

### So... WHAT is the "Church"?

In a New Testament biblical sense, the "Church" is an assembly of people, of "called out ones", who profess a biblical faith in Christ and in His Gospel message. It is not a place. It is not a building. It is not something we 'do'. The church is US! WE are the church. **What have we been called out of?** We have been called out of the world - out of the culture of sin and disobedience to God. Just like the ancient nation of Israel, God has called us to "set ourselves apart" and "to be holy as I am holy" that we might be a witness to the world of His glory and grace unto redemption through faith in Him alone.

In Jesus' dialogue with the Samaritan woman at the well in John 4, he illustrates the point that the church is not a place nor a building. The woman says (paraphrased) "Our fathers used to worship on this mountain, but you Jews say we should worship in Jerusalem at the Temple." Jesus abruptly stops her there and says effectively that the place of worship does not matter. What matters is that you worship the Father in spirit and in TRUTH[8]. So, His church is not a place. It is not a building. "Church" is the body of believers in the faith who worship our Lord in truth. So, why do we insist on calling the building "the church". See Helpful Connections below.



## Vocabulary, Names & Cultural Influences

- v.18. Jesus renames 'Peter' (Πετρος; Petros)** which means 'stone', a masculine noun.
- v.18. "On this 'rock'..." (πετρα; petra)** Here Jesus uses a different word than the one He used for 'Peter' (Petros). Petra means 'bedrock' or 'massive stone strata', a feminine noun. See note [4] below.
- v.18. Church (ἐκκλησίαν; ekklesia)** ek=out of; kaleo= to call out. The literal meaning of 'ekklesia' is "the ones called out". See Helpful Connections below.
- v.18. It (αὐτῆς; autes)** In the original language, this personal pronoun is feminine. Thus, its antecedent is the 'petra' of Peter's claim (petra is feminine). If Jesus had meant to say that He would build his church on Peter, this pronoun obligatorily would be masculine, referring back to 'Petros' (Petros is masculine).  
Therefore, Jesus' own choice of words shows us that the Church is not built on Peter, but on Peter's claim that Christ is the Son of the living God. Unfortunately, this linguistic detail is lost in languages, like English, with non-genderized nouns.
- v.18. "I will build..." (οἰκοδομήσῃ; oikodomeso)** This conjugated form of the verb unambiguously means "I will build". He is not saying "We will build".  
It is clear that HE will build it - and He'll use us to do it.
- v.18. "MY church" (μου; mou).** It is HIS.
- "Gates of hell..."** Jesus' choice of words implies that He expects us to take the offense in spreading His word. Think about it. A gate can never be used as an offensive weapon. Gates are for defense, implying there must be an offensive charge against it. *"For tho we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh for the weapons of our warfare (the Bible) are not of the flesh but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses..."* 2 Cor 10:3-4
- the Truth (Ἀληθεια; Aletheia):** The complete corpus of fundamental truths of the faith - The person of Jesus Christ and His true Gospel message.

