

Did the gates of hell prevail against the Church for 1500 years before the Reformation?

Matthew 16:18

The first question that we have to ask as we analyze this is; in what sense the Lord used the word "church" in Matthew 18:16?

There are five usages of the word "*church*" in the New Testament. The first and fundamental idea of the Church is that of living union with Christ. Registration in this church is not by ink and paper. This is the spiritual body of Christ whose names are "*written in the lambs book of life*" (Revelation 21:27). From this primary idea of the Church as a living organism all other uses of the word church are derived. The second use of the term church therefore is that of the visible and practical organisation of this on the earth of those who outwardly profess faith in Christ. The third idea is the local organisation into congregations; those gathered together in one place to worship. The fourth use in the New Testament is that of these local congregations uniting and associating under a common denominator, those forming what is known today as a denomination (Acts 8:1; 13:1). The fifth use of the word in the New Testament denotes a society of assembled believers as represented by their office-bearers and rulers (Matthew 18:17).

If Christ meant the local congregation we might say that the Devil prevailed against the church in Ephesus or Laodicea, or in other places where the church split through some petty problem. We might say that the Devil prevailed in destroying a 'church' (an organized gathering of professed believers).

If Christ meant the denomination in the sense that we would speak of church today we might say that the devil has prevailed in any number of denominations that have unashamedly apostatized.

If Christ meant the representative church (Matthew 18:17) we might say that the Devil has prevailed on a local session level or deacon level to destroy the harmony of God's people.

But If Christ meant the invisible Church then we have to say that nothing can prevail against the work of God in the heart of the most ardent sinner (Psalm 110:3). Satan cannot stand against the effectual call of the Gospel? The Devil is not able to extinguish the truth in the heart or to close the heart of those whom the Father has given to Christ (John 6:37; Acts 16:14).

Furthermore, the child of God is safe once he has been brought into the kingdom of God, none whom God has saved can or will be lost (Romans 8:35-39; John 10:28-29).

Let us briefly consider the visible Church. Has the visible church prevailed? We have to say that so far as the invisible Church has the visible Church has. There are a number of aspects that we need to keep in mind however.

First; our thinking is time related because we live in time and 1500 years is an awful long time for us. The longevity of trials was a continual and real problem for the Psalmist (Psalm 13:1; 35:17; etc.). But the Lord's plan for his church is eternal and time means nothing to him.

Second; We ought not to gauge the success of religion by human standards. God was still in control and victorious even when Elijah thought he was the only faithful one left on earth. God had reserved to himself those who were faithful (I Kings 19:18 *cf.* Romans 11:4). In the last days there is going to be a "*falling away*" and a "*waxing cold*" but this does not mean that Christ's Church is being defeated.

Third; The strength of the Kingdom of God ought not to be judged by the organized church. The reign of Christ is something that cannot be measured with the eye because the "*kingdom of God is within you*" (Luke 17:21) the Lord said. The church of Christ is first of all an *organism* and afterwards an *organization*. There are saints in strange places just as there were in Caesar's palace (Philippians 1:13).

Fourth; Having said this, the history of the Church shows that before the reformation there were individuals who looked to Christ alone for salvation and did not follow the Roman Church. We have the writings of men in history, such as the Confessions of Patrick and those of Augustine (both claimed by Rome) and other writings that give evidence of a true and sincere faith in Christ. Furthermore there were organized groups throughout the history of the Church who were opposed to the Roman Catholic system such as the Culdee in Ireland, the Waldensians in France and Northern Italy, the Lollards in England and John Huss in Bohemia.

Fifth; The question therefore is not did the gates of hell prevail, but did the Church of Christ advance. Is there a church of Christ today? Yes, therefore the purposes or designs of hell (the thought behind "*gates*" used as a figure of speech) have not prevailed. The Church of God is advancing and hell cannot hinder that advance.

Even if one soul were in heaven, delivered from the Kingdom of Satan, and all others consigned forever to the flames of hell with Satan, the Lord would be the victor and preeminent over his creation (Colossians 1:18), having proved his power both to save the believing and damn the unbelieving. But the Scripture tells us that in heaven there will be a multitude which no man can number (Revelation 7:9). This is good news, that God has power to save from the dominion of Satan, and keep them!