

## WHAT JESUS TAUGHT ABOUT THE CHURCH and THE SABBATH

(Taken and adapted from 'The Red Bits – A Study Guide' by Michael Button)

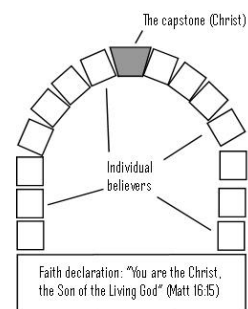
### A. THE CHURCH

**1. Definition.** The word for *church* in the Greek of the New Testament is *ekklesia*, which means literally 'called-out-of.' It was used by the secular Greeks for a gathering of citizens called together to discuss matters of state. When Jews were translating the Old Testament into Greek, they used the word *ekklesia* to refer to a gathering of the community of Israel coming together for any purpose, including that of worship. When Jesus referred to the Church, His hearers would have understood Him to mean a group of people brought together with a common purpose and identified as His people.

The Church differs from the Kingdom as a musical symphony differs from the notes that make it up. Each note may be individually in tune but only as they are heard *together* can they be identified as music: each member of the Kingdom may be in tune with God's will but only as they are seen together can they be identified as the Church. The Kingdom is God's unseen work in the lives of men and women, whereas the Church is the corporate medium through which Christ's work is manifested.

**2. The Community of Christ.** Jesus used three illustrations to speak of the community of His people, which we may identify as the Church:

(i) A Building. Jesus spoke of *building* His Church (*read* Matt 16:15-18). He spoke later of the rejected stone being made the *capstone*,\* which as Peter later explained refers to Jesus Himself (*read* Matt 21:42 & 1 Pet 2:4-6). A capstone is the wedge-shaped stone that locks all the other stones of an arch into place. Without it all the others would collapse. When Jesus said He would build His Church on the rock, He was probably referring not to Peter himself but to what Peter represented – the first of the many who recognise and declare their faith in Jesus as *The Christ, the Son of the Living God*. It is essential to have a firm foundation of faith in Who Jesus is if the Church is to be bound together as one community.



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Peter and other leaders of the Church who would follow him would have responsibilities to make decisions, under Christ, which would have far-reaching consequences. That is the natural meaning of the saying being *given the keys of the kingdom*.<sup>1</sup> Peter was the first to open the Kingdom to the masses he preached to on the Day of Pentecost and to the Gentiles when he went to the home of Cornelius.<sup>2</sup> The *binding and loosing* refer to the authority from heaven

\* Some Bible versions translate this as *cornerstone*.

<sup>1</sup> Matt 16:19.

<sup>2</sup> Acts 2:14-41 & Acts 10:1-48.

that Peter and his successors would have in making their decisions. This may include, but is not limited to, authority over evil spirits.

**Activity 1:** Which is the most accurate statement regarding Peter and the Church?

- (a) He is the stone that holds all the others together.
  - (b) He was the first of many to declare faith in Jesus as the Christ.
  - (c) He was unwavering in his faith and allegiance, like an immovable rock.
  - (d) He was the builder of the Church.
- (ii) A Flock. (*read* Luke 12:32 & Matt 26:31). Jesus leads the community as a shepherd leads his sheep. Indeed, He is *The Good Shepherd*. Read what Jesus said about this in John 10:10-16.

**Activity 2:** Answer the following questions from John 10:10-16:

- (a) What do Jesus' sheep have to the full? \_\_\_\_\_
- (b) What did Jesus lay down for His sheep? \_\_\_\_\_
- (c) Who know the Shepherd? \_\_\_\_\_
- (d) If the *sheep pen* refers to the Jews of Israel, who do you think are those who are not of that pen (v16)? \_\_\_\_\_
- (e) What are His sheep to do (in v16)? \_\_\_\_\_
- (f) How many flocks does the Good Shepherd have? \_\_\_\_\_

(iii) His Bride (*read* Mark 2:18-20). In isolation, this saying of Jesus does not refer to the Church. However, in the light of other Scriptures, it is apparent that the Church is pictured as the bride of Jesus. Read all of the following to get the full picture:

- John the Baptist's comment, in John 3:29).
- Paul's exhortation to husbands to follow Christ's example, in Eph 5:25-27.
- The redeemed in a future age, in Rev 21:2, 21:9, 22:17.

**3. The Church and Israel.** On the relation of the Church to the community of Israel, opinions vary between them being two distinct, coexisting bodies, to the Church having completely and eternally replaced Israel.

What we can know for certain from the teaching of Jesus is that:

- (i) Jesus wants Jews in His Church. The people of Israel were to be the first to receive the Gospel and to be called into the Kingdom (*read* Jesus' instruction to the disciples when they were sent on their first mission, in Matt 10:6). This being the case, the first members of the community of the Church were inevitably those of the community of Israel.

- (ii) Israel will have an identity in the Age to come. Jesus told the apostles (all of whom were Jews, i.e. from the community of Israel) that in the future age they will have a special place, or function, as judges of the twelve tribes of Israel (*read* Matt 19:28). The Old Testament patriarchs and Christian believers will be together in the Future Kingdom (*read* Matt 8:11).
- (iii) Others will be brought into the Church and be one flock, as we have seen in Section 2.

Again we need to turn to the teaching of the Apostles for further understanding of Jesus' teaching. In Romans 11 Paul illustrates the place of Gentiles in the Church as being *grafted* into an existing plant (Israel). Elsewhere he speaks of not all the descendants of Israel being truly Israel, meaning that those who belong to the community of Christ are those of true faith, whether they are from Jewish heritage or not.<sup>3</sup> On this basis, it looks as if the Church is a continuation of Israel but that only those with true faith (whether Jew or Gentile) are members of this community. However, as has been mentioned, opinions differ. Christians must be tolerant of fellow believers who hold a different view.

**4. The Structure of the Church.** Every community must have a structure if it is to survive as a community. The Church is no exception. There is only one Church, with Christ at the Head,<sup>4</sup> but it is inevitable that the Church must form into separate communities for people of a locality to be able to meet together. It was left to the Apostles and missionaries to organise these local structures but Jesus recognised them when:

- (i) He promised to be present with small numbers gathering in His Name (*read* Matt 18:20).
- (ii) He gave an indication of judgment and discipline to be exercised by the Church (*read* Matt 18:15-18). This declares that disciplinary decisions made by the Church are to have divine ratification, thus giving great authority and responsibility to the self-government of the Church. (Jesus must have had local *units* of the Church in mind, since it would be impossible for individual cases of discipline to be heard by the worldwide Church.)

Activity 3: Which of the following refers to the Kingdom of God and which to the Church?

- (a) A community of people with a common purpose. \_\_\_\_\_
- (b) God's rule in the lives of men and women. \_\_\_\_\_
- (c) A structured organisation created by Jesus. \_\_\_\_\_
- (d) Proclaimed by Jesus at the start of His ministry. \_\_\_\_\_

<sup>3</sup> Rom 9:6.

<sup>4</sup> Eph 5:23.

**Activity 4:** For thought. In what ways might belonging to the Church help believers face the trials of discipleship?

## B. THE SABBATH

**Introduction.** The basic meaning of *Sabbath* is 'cessation of activity.' The Fourth of the Ten Commandments<sup>5</sup> decrees that the Sabbath Day is to be kept holy and observed as a day when work should cease, as God ceased work after six days of Creation. Since the Jewish week was counted from Sunday, the seventh day to be observed as the Sabbath was Saturday.

Much of the opposition to Jesus' work from the Jewish religious leaders was over the issue of His working on the Sabbath. They strongly criticised Jesus for doing works of healing on the Sabbath day. This opposition highlighted the wider issue of the way in which these outwardly pious groups turned the Commandments of God into a multiplicity of rules and regulations, many of which concerned activities they demanded must not be carried out on the Sabbath day. Jesus did not say that this commandment, or any other, was wrong, nor that it was no longer valid. Indeed He said that He had not come to destroy God's Law and nothing would pass away from that Law until its purpose had been fulfilled.<sup>6</sup> However, the exaggerated Sabbath observance practised and taught by the Pharisees was contrary to the spirit of the command.

**1. The Sabbath was given for mankind's benefit.** As such, it is wrong to impose a burden of restriction and to worry lest one had broken a Sabbath *rule* (read Matt 12:1-2). S. Westerholm writes: 'God's intentions with the Sabbath are distorted when humans are subjected to a rigid code.'<sup>7</sup>

Jesus told the Pharisees:

- (i) *The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath.*<sup>8</sup> Man should not be ruled by the Sabbath but should enjoy the opportunities that a day free from normal working activities can bring. Herbert Lockyer calls the Lord's Day (an expression used by some Christians to speak of the Sabbath) as 'Dykes, protecting our lives from the invading sea of secularity.'<sup>9</sup>
- (ii) It is not wrong to do good on the Sabbath, even if this might be construed as 'work' (read Matt 12:11-13).
- (iii) Human need takes precedence over Sabbath rest. Jesus cited the *unlawful* action of David and his troops when, to avoid starvation, they ate bread that was set aside for holy use (read Matt 12:3-4\*).

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 20 verses 8-11.

<sup>6</sup> Matt 5:17-19. (Note that a 'jot' was the letter *iota*, the smallest in the Hebrew alphabet, and 'tittle' was a small mark to help distinguish one letter from another).

<sup>7</sup> *The Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*<sup>b</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> Mark 2:27.

<sup>9</sup> *What Jesus Taught About ...* Vol 3, page 103<sup>b</sup>.

\* The incident can be found in 1 Sam 21 verses 1-6 and the law about the holy bread in Exodus 25 verse 30.

Most Christians now hold to Sunday, instead of Saturday, as the day of ceasing work. Nevertheless, Christians still hold different views about what constitutes work on Sundays. Many are required to work on a Sunday to keep the machinery of our present day society functioning; but some refuse to take employment that requires some Sunday working. Some engage in a range of recreation activities; whereas some abstain from all such activities. If one is guided by Jesus' maxim that the Sabbath was given by God for mankind's benefit, then the right balance may be struck by avoiding that which is a burden (either by working without a weekly break or by self-denial from all wholesome activities) and seeking to gain the benefits that such a break of routine can bring. However, this is very much a matter of individual conscience and it is not for us to dictate to or to criticise those who hold a view that is different to our own.

**2. Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath** (*read* Mark 2:27-28). Since the Sabbath was given for man's benefit, the One who is Lord has the right to say what to do with it.

**3. Ceasing from work does not mean idleness.** The Pharisees accused Jesus of working on the Sabbath Day. Jesus did not claim He was not working, in fact He described His acts of healing as doing the work of His Father (*read* John 5:16-17).

Read Matt 12:10-12. Here Jesus refers to the practice of saving a stranded animal on the Sabbath Day. This was actually contrary to a strict interpretation of the Law, such as the Pharisees were demanding, but it seems to have been common practice, not only for humane considerations, but because the animal's owner would not want to lose a valuable animal. Jesus is here making the point that the salvation of a human soul, or the restoration of human health, is more important than adherence to an exaggerated code of Sabbath observance.

Activity 4: For thought: In point (i) above it was mentioned that one should enjoy the opportunities that a day free from normal working activities can bring. What are those opportunities?