

Incarnating the Gospel

According to Statistics South Africa, out of our country's population of 49.9 million people, 35 750 641 claim to be Christians (<http://www.southafrica.info/about/people/population.htm> 2010/11/19) That's 80%. When you walk out the door, according to that census, most of the people you're encountering are Christians. That's how they identify themselves. They are self-identified Christians.

And given how Christians are supposed to treat each other, I would say that ought to make South Africa close to paradise, as the Millennium come true. Since we know that isn't the case, what do we say about the figure that 80% of our country is Christian?

Of course Statistics SA is not using the Bible's definition of a Christian. To be regarded as inside Christianity by Statistics SA, you simply have to say you are.

However, we have been seeing from 2 John that the gospel is the boundary of Christianity. To believe the gospel is to be inside the circle. To disbelieve the gospel is to be outside the circle.

The question is – in a very real, practical sense, how do we know who has believed the gospel and who hasn't? Since belief is an invisible thing, how do we know who is inside this boundary of Christianity? How do we know who has believed the gospel?

Do we get a card that shows we belong? Do we get a tattoo that reveals we have believed? Is there a necklace or an ornament we wear to show it? Do we gain a glow around our heads that reveals we have believed? What mechanism is there for testing if someone has truly believed?

It used to be fairly easy to identify God's people. Before the coming of Christ, you would go to a specific region – Israel – and look for the people who were set apart to God, circumcised, obeying the Law, keeping the Sabbath. But that has changed. God's people are no longer identified with a specific ethnic people in a specific region. How do you identify these people who have believed the gospel?

The problem is, many, many people claim to believe, but as they'll tell you, their belief is a private and personal thing. They tell you that are Christians or saved or believers, but they will say something like, I don't need a church to validate my personal relationship with Jesus. In fact, another figure shows that perhaps 56% of that 80% attends any kind of church. In other words, in their minds, the way you can verify that they are Christians is because they say they are. If they make the claim, then you must believe it.

However, we don't have to go far very far into the New Testament to see what the Bible thinks of that. The New Testament authors are full of warnings about believing yourself or others to be saved merely because you think you are, or because they think they are. Jeremiah 17:9 tells us that the heart, above all things is deceitful. You have a lie factory inside you, one that will lie to you when you ask it if it is lying. In world so full of deceit, false teaching, false gospels, complicated by our own lying hearts, how could we ever know who is saved and who isn't?

Graciously, Jesus has given us a mechanism. He has given us something that marks out the boundary for us. It cannot tell us what only God knows, but when used rightly, this mechanism can come very close to revealing the saved from the unsaved, believers from the world. Jesus showed us what this boundary-marker is in the book of Matthew. It takes the gospel, and makes it visible.

In three passages in Matthew, two of which we'll study more closely, Jesus reveals that the local church is the method God uses to preach the gospel, affirm those who believe the gospel, unite them

to itself, nourish and protect them, and keep out or remove those who deny the gospel.

In a world reeling with individualism, drunk on autonomy, firmly convinced of the power and freedom and rights of the individual – this can seem hard to swallow. But I want you to see it from the lips of the Lord Jesus. Jesus has made the gospel the boundary, and the local church the physical manifestation of that boundary. If the gospel is the boundary, then the local church is the paint that marks it out on the ground.

The way we know that these passages are linked is because of some key similarities. In both Matthew 16 and Matthew 18, Jesus refers to the church, which is the first time in the New Testament that it is referred to, in its technical sense. In both passages, we have this strange statement about whatever is bound or loosed on earth shall be bound and loosed in heaven. Both passages have a futuristic bent, because the church had not yet been established. These passages are clearly connected.

What we are going to see in these passages is the basis of this boundary-marker, the nature of the boundary-marker, and the authority of this boundary-marker.

Let's begin in Matthew 16 and then set the scene.

Matthew 16:13-19 When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" ¹⁴ So they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ Jesus answered and said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸ "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹ "And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

This particular Scripture has been a source of great debate. Roman Catholics have used this passage to claim that Jesus built his church on Peter, and since Peter was the bishop of Rome, he was the first pope. Therefore, they say, the only true church is the church with an unbroken succession of Roman bishops stretching back to Peter himself. Protestants have vigorously disagreed with that interpretation. There's a lot at stake here.

Let's set the scene. The book of Matthew is largely focused on showing that Jesus is the true heir of David – the rightful King of Israel. The first 11 chapters show that in his genealogy, his birth, His Messianic miracles, His Sermon on the Mount. Jesus offers the kingdom to Israel by offering Himself as the King. But by chapter 12, it is clear that Israel is not interested. The physical kingdom has to be postponed, and God's program is going to take another form. Jesus slowly unveils this form in the parables, and now in this Scripture. He's explaining how the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven is going to manifest itself in the immediate future.

So here we're about to see

I. The Basis of The Boundary-Marker.

Here Jesus asks the disciples who people say He is. They give Him the various answers, and then Jesus asks them, "but who do you say I am". Peter's response is "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God"

That is, Peter says – you are the Messiah, the one chosen by God to be prophet, priest and king. Not

only that, but you are the Son of the living God.

What is it that Peter is confessing? What would another name be for his confession? He sees this is the God-Man, the Saviour of the world, and he has given up all to follow Him. He is confessing the gospel. Jesus is God, Man, Son of God, Saviour, Redeemer and King.

The proof that Peter has just confessed the gospel is seen in Jesus' response:

"Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven

Jesus says, Peter you didn't learn this merely from men. You know this because God has opened your eyes. You have believed the good news about the Person and work of Jesus because of an act of the Father.

2 Corinthians 4:4-6 whose minds the god of this age has blinded, who do not believe, lest the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine on them. ⁵ For we do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord, and ourselves your bondservants for Jesus' sake. ⁶ For it is the God who commanded light to shine out of darkness, who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Now don't miss the importance of this. We've been seeing the boundary of Christianity is the gospel. When Jesus is about to predict the founding of the church, what comes before He does so? A profession of the gospel. A profession that is supernatural. God has chosen Peter. God had opened Peter's eyes.

Now comes the critical words:

And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.

Peter had said, you are the Christ. Now Jesus responds and says, you are Peter. Now there's a play on words going on here. In Greek, the word for rock is *petra*. Peter in Greek is *Petros*. So Jesus is saying, you are Petros and on this *petra*, I will build my church.

What does he mean? Does he mean the church is based on Peter? Does He mean the church is based on Peter's profession of the gospel?

The best answer is: both. Jesus is building his church on the apostles, with Peter being the leader. But he is not building it on personalities. He is building it on the faith of these apostles. Throughout the book of Acts, you see Peter going, and Peter confessing. These twelve men believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. That was a minority belief at the time.

Jesus is saying that the basis of this new boundary-marker will be the gospel, the gospel preached by the apostles and then recorded for us in the New Testament books they wrote.

But these same words reveal something else to us about this boundary-marker. In Christ's words, we also learn of

II. The Nature of This Boundary Marker

What is Jesus building that will visibly demonstrate the gospel? Is He building a cathedral? Is He building a bureaucracy? Is He building a political party? What is it that Jesus is building?

Look at those words again.

And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.

This is the first time the word *church* appears in this sense. It means assembly. It simply refers to a group that is gathered.

But it is a specific assembly – it is Christ's assembly. *My church*, Jesus says. A people assembled around Jesus. Jesus is the rallying call.

This boundary-marker that Jesus is building is not a party, a building, a structure. The boundary marker is going to be a group of people. Jesus is going to build a new assembly, His own assembly. He is going to build a Jesus-gathering, an assembled group.

This is the incredible thought – it is in these gathered groups of people who belong to Jesus, that the gospel will be incarnated,

Jesus is explaining how the invisible kingdom of God is going to be physically recognisable on earth. He is lovingly showing how people will be able to know who belongs and who does not. Surprisingly, it is in this simple thing called the church.

And what kind of power will it have?
and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it

The church, as Jesus builds it will not be stopped by Hades. It will burst those gates. Hades is the place of the dead, so Jesus probably means, my church will not be stopped by or controlled by or intimidated by death. It will conquer, and plunder death of its captives.

As simple as the church might be, as flawed as it might seem, Jesus has invested it with amazing authority.

III. The Authority of this Boundary-Marker

Now comes the words which are controversial, and yet amazing when understood.

And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

What do keys do? Keys are used to lock doors to keep people out, and to unlock doors to let people in. What keys does Jesus give to Peter and the apostles? The keys to the kingdom of heaven. It looks as if Jesus is saying, I authorise you to open and close, to keep in and to let out.

The unseen, invisible rule of God, that is now going to be worked out through the church, here seen through Peter, instead of through Israel. He is giving Peter, and the apostles the authority, corporately, to open and shut, to bind, that is, to lock, and to loose, that is, to unlock.

But what thing is it that Jesus is building? An assembly. An assembly of people. Therefore what is the binding and loosing of? Bricks? Rocks? Thoughts? Sins? No, the binding and loosing is of people into or out of the assembly.

And Jesus says, whatever you, who have these keys do on earth, it is done so in heaven. Your decisions on earth are fleshing out and making visible what is unseen and invisible. What you do here on earth will be making known and seen and tangible and visible what has already been opened and closed in heaven.

What does that mean? The church, here represented by Peter and the apostles, is responsible for opening and closing the door that visually represents who is in the kingdom. That is, who belongs to Jesus Christ, who is inside the boundary.

It is not that they save people. It is not that they forgive people's sins. They are to be doorkeepers, gatekeepers for this on earth demonstration of invisible realities.

Those who profess the gospel and live like it, are to be let in. Jesus authorises them to do that.

Those who deny the gospel, are to be kept out. Those within who begin denying the gospel are to be loosed, let out – Jesus authorises them to do this.

Peter and the apostles, are told that as they begin the church, they and it will become responsible to open the door to those who are inside the gospel, and close the door to those who are not. Or to put it another way, they are to safely secure believers inside, and open the door to let out those who are not.

That's a remarkable responsibility. In fact, it is very hard for people today to believe that it is the church's responsibility. We believe that we personally accept Jesus as Saviour, and we have personal relationship with Jesus, and as far as we're concerned, that's all we need to know we are saved. We've prayed this prayer, we feel a connection to God, we read the Bible and pray, so we know we're saved. We don't need anything else. We're in the kingdom.

But Jesus suggests something different. He suggests that while it is He and He alone that saves you, the way this is made visible on earth is the Jesus assembly, when "My church" uses its Christ-given keys to open or close the doors of affirmation. You can't escape the idea that Jesus is setting up an institution, and organisation, and investing it with authority.

Do you see what's going on here? Jesus is building an assembly of people – a heavenly people, no longer merely an earthly, political kingdom. But how do you identify this heavenly people? Well, it begins with the profession of the gospel as Peter gave it. The local church is built on the gospel and the doctrines of the apostles. But you then identify with Christ's appointed affirmation-body.

To this corporate body, Jesus says, I delegate to you keys. Your decisions together open the door and shut it. You don't save anyone. But you are responsible to make visible what is invisible. You are responsible for making this boundary of the gospel clear, and letting in those who profess it, and removing those who don't.

Now contrary to some teaching, the keys were not given to Peter alone, but to the local church wherever it exists. We find proof of this in Matthew 18.

Matthew 18:15-20 Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. ¹⁶ "But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' ¹⁷ "And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. ¹⁸ "Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. ¹⁹ "Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. ²⁰ "For where two or

In this Scripture we find out that the keys were not given to Peter alone, but to the local church. And here the situation is the well-known situation of an unrepentant professing believer. Some kind of sin or offence takes place between believers. Jesus says – go to your brother alone and tell him. Seek to restore him. If he hears you, that is, if he repents, you gained him back. But if he refuses to

hear, take two or three witnesses. Let them see if he truly is unrepentant, or if perhaps the problem is you. And if they see he really is at fault, they might join in calling him to repent. And if he refuses to hear you and the witnesses, tell the church. Once again, the use of this special term – church.

Tell the whole assembly of this attitude of unrepentant, stubborn, wilfulness. Let the whole assembly begin calling on him to repent. And if he will not hear the whole assembly, *then the relationship changes*.

How does it change? He goes from being considered a brother, to being considered a heathen, a tax-collector. These were Jewish terms that meant unbeliever or even traitor. Someone who was considered part of us but no longer is. Someone whom we considered family, but no longer do so. In other words, Jesus says, at a certain point, you as a church change your view of the person's status.

Look at the next verse. We've seen it before:

"Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

Jesus says, what you as a church decide about a person proven to be stubbornly committed to his or her own sin, is actually making visible what is invisible. This is not just Peter's responsibility, but the church's. The church is to know the gospel, and know when it has been denied.

Titus 1:16 ¹⁶ They profess to know God, but in **works** they **deny** Him, being abominable, disobedient, and disqualified for every good work.

Let me show you one more Matthew text.

Matthew 28:18-20 And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. ¹⁹ "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ "teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen.

The church, as it goes, shares the message of Jesus Christ – the message that people should follow Christ and be His disciples. By God's grace, some hear the call, and like Peter realise that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the living God. What must the church then do with these people who profess the gospel?

The church baptises them. The church makes a public, visible, demonstrable act that takes the heavenly reality and makes it visible, tangible and clear.

But then the church takes the baptised one and affirms it by inclusion. It uses its keys to say – because of your profession of faith and your baptism, for the time you are with us, we include you as those we give an account for. To the best of our knowledge, you believe the gospel, and as you live with us in a body, we see that your profession is backed up by your life.

On the other hand, if a person's life begins to cast doubt on their profession of the gospel, the church begins calling them, admonishing them, seeking to restore them. And the one thing which a Christian does not do is stubbornly and persistently refuse to repent. Because the gospel is all about repentance. So whatever the situation, if a Christian absolutely refuses to repent, the church keeps working to restore, until it must eventually make a decision. The decision it makes is one of a change of status.

We say, just as we affirmed this person's baptism, and accepted them into covenant with us, we now

can no longer do that. Based on his or her repetitive sin and refusal to repent, we can no longer vouch for their true belief in the gospel. We want our roll to correspond with heaven's, so we can not in good faith and good conscience confirm this one as a believer. Therefore, we loose them.

And their status changes. The nature of our relationship to that person changes. They are to us now as an unbeliever. As far as we are concerned, what they need is the gospel. Our interaction with them will be like an unsaved acquaintance – we primarily want them to repent.

Heaven has a membership roll. The charter of the church is to do its best to accurately reflect in its membership, those who are on heaven's roll.

When a church is prayerful, careful, submitted to the Word, Spirit-led and controlled and it carefully, justly evaluates professions of faith, and then makes a decision to affirm that profession of faith. It listens to the testimonies, and when it is corporately satisfied, it uses its keys to include, to join a person to itself. It brings them in, and protects. It binds, in a positive sense- bring them within the shelter from the world, and locking the door behind.

On the other hand, it sadly has to unlock the door sometimes, and say, we loose this one, not knowing if they truly know our Lord.

This is heaven's membership roll being fleshed out. The only difference is, heaven's roll does not delete any names. The local church is using God's Word and God's Spirit to make sure its roll best as possible reflects heaven's roll.

1 Corinthians 5:12 ¹² For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside?

Does the church always get it right? No. Does the church make mistakes? Yes. Sometimes those who ought not be let in are allowed in. Sometimes, those who ought not to be put out are put out. This is the reality of being fallen, weak, sinful human beings. Does that mean that we throw away Christ's words, and decide that they just can't mean what they say?

No, but yet with all our frailty and weakness and fallibility, will you look at Christ's amazing trust in us?

"Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. ²⁰ "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."

This is a decision the whole church takes. It is not something you have to shoulder alone. It is not something the pastor does by himself. It is a judgement the church reaches corporately. We all stand under the umbrella of the decision we all make. And when we make these decisions together, to accept or to reject, to receive or to remove, when we make these decisions together, wondrously, the Lord Himself is in our midst.

"Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. ²⁰ "For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."

Think about this negatively for a moment. Would you dare claim to recruit people for the Sharks rugby team? Would you offer someone a position on the president's cabinet? No you don't have the authority to do that. But if you are an included member of a local church, you, too, are given the keys to recruit, consider the qualification and accept people into the church as *bona fide* citizens of heaven. You also have the keys, alongside the other believers, to remove that affirmation, and

release people back into the world, where perhaps they will be brought to true repentance.

At my local church, we affirm the baptism and profession of faith and Christian testimony of those who are members. Now of course, we have several children who are too young to understand the gospel, or who we have not yet heard their testimony of faith. But outside those members we cannot give an account for the others, at least not at this time. We love them. We enjoy their company. We're glad they come each week. We're thankful for the contribution they make. But were the Lord to call me to the judgement seat and say, "And who do you, as the under-shepherd of this flock, say belongs to Me?", I would say, "These ones who are members, Lord. These ones we, and all the believers here, have used the keys you gave us to affirm."

"Christ...gives the church this authority in order to protect and display his gospel in a fallen world which continually misunderstands and misportrays his gospel love." (Jonathan Leeman – *The Church an the Surprising Offense of God's Love*)

In a world of false gospels, and while captive to my own self-deceit, one of the most important things I need to do for assurance of salvation is to submit my self to this mechanism which Christ entrusted the keys to. I do not do this to be saved; I do this to verify that I am saved. Wherever I might be moved about, I want to find a body where two or three are gather in the Christ's name, and there submit my testimony of salvation to them for scrutiny. More than that, I want to submit my life to their scrutiny, so that they may see that I have not believed in vain.

In other words, I want the Scriptural witness of minimum two or three, excluding myself to affirm my testimony. If Christ invested the local church with authority to flesh out on earth what is done in heaven, then I want to find a biblical local church, and let them use their corporate authority to affirm my testimony and unite me to them.

Who Statistics SA says is a Christian does not really matter. Whom local churches affirm as Christians is as important as if heaven itself spoke. This is the amazing responsibility and privilege of being members together in the local church.