

Basic Form of the Church

The answer to the question “What is the Church?” may seem obvious, but as soon as we attempt to provide a precise reply, we see that the matter is not as simple as it might appear. There are different, even opposing ideas of what the Church is supposed to be, how it is established, and what is its essence and main task in the world. The whole vision of Christian life and action, and the way it is organised, depends on this. We are dealing with the key question of how Christians are to exist and act in the contemporary world, how we are to relate to one another and how we are to carry out the mission “to the end of the earth” entrusted to us.

Jesus on the Church

It is a striking fact that the Church is hardly mentioned in the Gospels – in Mark, Luke and John it does not occur at all, the only two mentions are in [Matthew 16:18](#) and [18:17](#). In a Greco-Roman context, the word *ekklesia*, which is found here, denotes a solemn, official assembly, which has a certain authority, possibly in a political sense; it is used, for example, for a voting assembly of citizens, which decides on the affairs of the polis – today’s equivalent would be the parliament. The word also appears in the Septuagint, where it refers to the assembly of the Israelites under Mount Sinai (e.g. in [Dt 9:10](#), etc.).

In Mt 16:18, Jesus seems to subvert that Old Testament story, claiming that “his assembly”, i.e. “the assembly of God gathered around the Messiah”, will now be built on the foundation of the faith that Peter has just confessed. (That the word *pétra* is not referring to Peter himself, but to his faith that Jesus is the Messiah and Son of God, is attested by various early church fathers.) The foundation of the Church, then, is the faith in the gospel, the simple recognition and public confession of who Jesus is – the Messiah and Son of God, that is, the one authorised to fulfil all the promises of God, the one towards whom all Israel’s hopes and expectations are directed to.

The second reference to the Church in the Gospel of Matthew (18:17) is in the context of “church discipline”. It is followed by three verses which obviously refer to and explain the concept of the Church. The first one ([v.](#)

[18](#)) repeats the promise to Peter in [16:19](#), which is now extended to include all believers; this explains why the “disciplinary” decision of the gathered Church in v. 17 is authoritative or “valid” even in heaven, that is, with God. [V. 19](#) then contains a promise of answered prayer, and specifically emphasises the power of corporate, unanimous prayer. This verse explains how decisions made on earth can become valid “by the Father in heaven.” And [v. 20](#) adds to all this the promise of Jesus’ personal presence “where two or three are gathered together in his name”. This verse provides the foundation or basis for all the astonishing and shocking statements of the previous verses. Because Jesus is personally present among his own, their petitions are heard, since, in a sense, they are mediated or prayed by himself. And thus, their decisions – made in this spirit (or more precisely: in the Holy Spirit) – are also valid in heaven: they are actually his decisions.

*“In the Name”, “two or three”, “in the midst of them” –
restoration of sanctuary of God*

Let’s look at v. 20 more closely. To be gathered “in the name of Jesus” or literally “into the name of Jesus” means to be gathered to him and for his sake, for what he is and what he does. This, what he does, is called “the gospel” by Jesus himself, and is essentially and indissolubly tied to his person (see the expression “for my sake and the gospel’s” in [Mk 8:35](#) and [10:29](#) and the other uses of the term “gospel” in the Synoptics). After Jesus’ resurrection, this “work of the gospel” becomes the mission “to the uttermost ends of the world” (cf. [Ac 1:8](#)), to which the disciples of Jesus are called. The expression “to be gathered in the name of Jesus” is therefore partly overlapping with “to take up the yoke of Jesus” ([Mt 11:29](#)) and presupposes at least an “operational” identification with Jesus. Whoever acts “in the name” of someone is acting with his authority, as his representative, to perform a certain task for him or instead of him. To be “gathered in the name of Jesus” therefore means two things: close fellowship with him, joining with him in one spirit (cf. [1Co 6:17!](#)), and also entering into his mission, meeting with him because of his work (a working meeting where the boss gives instructions to the workers). The latter requires of the disciples an attitude of commitment, obedience, and willingness not only to be personally, “spiritually” united with Jesus, but also to be identified with the purposes and aims of his work, to be

conformed to his mission in the world. In addition to its spiritual or even mystical aspect, this gathering has a very concrete, earthly, active dimension.

The mention of “two or three” in v. 20 is a reference to the “two or three witnesses” from [v. 16](#) (a quotation from [Dt 19:15](#)). In v. 20, this takes on a new dimension: already with two or three confessing the name of Jesus, a foundational witness or testimony of God/Jesus is established in the world. This “testimony” points in the direction of the “testimony” that was in the ark of the covenant ([Ex 25:16,21](#); these were the tablets inscribed with the finger of God) and which gave its name first to the ark itself ([Ex 25:22](#); [27:21](#)) and then to the whole dwelling place or tabernacle of God ([Nu 1:50](#); [9:15](#)). This authoritative testimony makes the “church of the living God” both “the household of God” and “a pillar and buttress of the truth” ([1Ti 3:15](#)), that is to say, an “institution” of the true knowledge of God in the world.

The establishment of God’s dwelling place among his people is further indicated by Jesus’ words “there I am in the midst of them”. They are closely reminiscent of the words about the setting up of God’s tabernacle in the Exodus: “And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, who brought them out of the land of Egypt that I might dwell among them. I am the LORD their God.” ([Ex 29:46](#); cf. also the eschatological promises in [Joel 2:27](#) and [Zec 2:10–11](#)).

This concurrence of the heavenly and the earthly, the coexistence of God with man, may explain Jesus’ outrageous claim in v. 18 that a church gathering is indeed about “settling the affairs in the relation between heaven and earth”. Here the primal priestly ministry is exercised, the ministry of mediation between God and creation, which was entrusted to the first man, lost in the fall, restored in Israel ([Ex 19:6](#)), fully realized in Jesus ([Heb 3:1](#)), and entrusted to his whole Church ([1Pe 2:5,9](#); [Rev 1:6](#)).

Jesus’ statement in Mt 18:20 also has a striking parallel in early Jewish literature which confirms the above. In the Talmudic tractate Sayings of the Fathers (Pirkei Avot) 3.3, we read: “Two that sit together and are occupied in words of Torah have the Shekinah among them.” It is possible that some form of this saying already existed in Jesus’ time, and that Jesus subverted it, as he did with many Old Testament sayings. In this case, there would be a double provocation: “being in the name of Jesus” is equated with God’s Torah, and Jesus’ presence is nothing less than Yahweh’s Shekinah.

Either way, whether this reference is real or not, it is certain that the promise of Jesus’ personal presence is inscribed into the larger New

Testament theme of the restoration of God's sanctuary and of the return of Yahweh's glory. As we know, this expectation among the Jews was bound to the coming of the Messiah. There are several places in the Gospels which show that this was fulfilled in Jesus in an unexpected but real way. In [Mt 12:6](#), Jesus is "greater than the temple". The accusation in [Mk 14:58](#) ("I will destroy this temple that is made with hands, and in three days I will build another, not made with hands.") is based on a true statement of Jesus, according to [Jn 2:19](#). And John's statement, "The Word of God has tabernacled/pitched his tent among us, and we have seen his glory/majesty" ([Jn 1:14](#), a literal translation), obviously points in the same direction: in Jesus God has decisively restored his sanctuary, his dwelling place among men, and with him the glory of God has returned (cf. also [2Co 4:6!](#)).

Mt 18:20 therefore represents the extension of this great promise of God to the gathered community: wherever it gathers "in the Name", there is the Shekinah, there is the true temple of God. This theme is later developed in Paul's letters and other New Testament writings ([1Co 3:16](#); [6:19](#); [2Co 6:16](#); [Eph 2:21](#); [1Pe 2:5](#); [Rev 3:12](#)), and is related specifically to the promise of the Holy Spirit.

Matthew 18:20 as fundamental definition of the Church

In the light of the foregoing, we can conclude that in Jesus' statement in Mt 18:20 we have the main definition and grounding of the Church. Given the weight of what has been shown - where only two or three are gathered "in the name of Jesus", there is already the true sanctuary of God, the true temple, the Shekinah of Yahweh - we must also say the following: this is the fundamental and *sufficient* definition. Whatever else the Church might be beside that is *secondary*, like fine print, like something that grows organically out of it and serves this fundamental promise of Jesus' presence among his own. Everything else is in subservience to that promise, not autonomous, but established (and abolished) precisely vis-a-vis that promise. Why is it necessary to stress this? Because nothing else, no addition, no extra thing could even slightly increase this fundamental gift, the gift of God's Shekinah in Messiah Jesus, which, according to his promise, is truly established or made manifest already with two or three gathered "in his name".

This is “the church model” of Jesus: simple, direct, and at the same time ecclesiologically supremely high (the Church is nothing less than the dwelling place of God himself) and humanly uncatchable (the Church can suddenly be established anywhere and also suddenly be abolished as soon as the assembly is no longer “in the name of Jesus”, according to the above definition). This model must therefore take precedence over all other ecclesial modes and models and can, in fact, clarify and make sense of them. Let us therefore look at its relationship to other, more familiar church models.

Matthew 18:20 and other church models

Sacramental model

The sacramental model can be briefly described as follows: “The Church is where the sacraments are” (especially the Lord’s supper/Eucharist as the means of Jesus’ visible re-presentation). In the light of Mt 18:20, we can immediately say two things: such a view is justified as an “extension” and concretization of the promise of Jesus’ presence given to us. But it is a “functional” extension: through the sacraments, God helps us to cling to this promise in a better, more concrete way and to experience it in a real, tangible way. Mt 18:20 therefore, on the one hand, allows for a high “sacramental theology” (we really do encounter Jesus in the sacraments), but at the same time it also sets a limit to it – the sacraments do not mediate Jesus “in and of themselves”, because of some specific promise that would be independently bound to them alone, but precisely and solely in the power of this first, fundamental, wider promise that Jesus will be among those “gathered in his name”. (For example, this immediately problematizes the possibility of a “private Lord’s supper” – at least two gathered persons are necessary for such participation in Jesus.) But again: it is precisely in the power of this first and broader promise that Jesus can be actually, really, tangibly present in the baptismal water and in the bread and wine, because both ordinances are performed according to his word, and because around these visible images the disciples of Jesus are truly gathered “in his name”.

Hierarchical model

The hierarchical church model can be defined as follows: "The Church gathers around an authorised leader." In the Catholic and Orthodox tradition, this leader is the bishop who is part of the apostolic succession. In the evangelical and especially charismatic tradition, it is the pastor who is especially distinguished by the gifts of God. In the first case, such a leader derives his authority from God indirectly (through apostolic succession), and in the second case directly (through the charisms of the Holy Spirit); a combination of both "authentications" is of course also common.

In a broader sense, it could be said that what occurs here is a high valuing of the church ministries, which are understood as a condition of church's existence. We find views pointing in this direction very early on: "My child, day and night remember him who speaks the word of God to you, and honour him as the Lord, for the Lord is where (his) lordship is proclaimed." (Didache 4:1) The teaching aspect (proclamation of the word of God) will be discussed later, but here we focus on the idea that the church leader/minister is in some sense re-presenting Jesus. A little later, Ignatius of Antioch expresses this even more forcefully: "It is clear, then, that we must look upon the bishop as the Lord himself." (Eph 6.1) "The bishop presides in the place of God" (Magn 6.1). "... let all respect the deacons as Jesus Christ, and also the bishop, who is a type of the Father" (Tral 3.1). "Be ... obedient to the bishop as to the commandment (of God), and likewise obedient to the elders." (Tral 13.2) "Wherever the bishop appears, there the congregation should also be, just as the whole Church is where Jesus Christ is." (Smyrn 8.2) Such a notion soon became widely accepted, as the Apostolic Constitutions (a collection of writings from the 3rd or 4th century) show: "[The bishop] is your ruler and governor; he is your king and potentate; he is, next after God, your earthly god, who has a right to be honoured by you." (2.26)

What can we say to all this in the light of Mt 18:20? Jesus' promise of his personal presence and of answered prayer makes the existence of powerful church ministries possible, the ministries that really act in the power of God himself and therefore, in a sense, mediate and re-present him. But as with the sacraments, so we must also say here: they are able to do this not because of some specific promise or authority entrusted to ecclesial ministries in a separate, autonomous, independent way, but because of that first, broader promise and authority given to the "two or three". But again: it is precisely in the power of this promise that ministries can constitute a

direct “branch”, an “extension” of Jesus into the world. Thus, words like, “The one who hears you hears me, and the one who rejects you rejects me” ([Lk 10:16](#)) are to be found already in the Gospels. And this idea is even more explicit in the epistles: “Whoever speaks, [let him do so] as one who speaks oracles of God” ([1Pe 4:11](#)). Jesus’ fundamental promise, then, makes it possible for powerful ministries to operate in the body of the Church, but on the other hand it also limits them, since the primary and ultimate authority is established before them and therefore possibly without them, especially if the ministers would be losing their radical anchoring “in the name of Jesus” and begin to act in their own or in some other “name” or “denomination”. Any authority that church ministers might have, is therefore relative vis-a-vis the absolute authority that is established (and abolished!) among the “two or three”. Hence the New Testament writings favour an organic vision of the body of the Church, where each part or “member” contributes to the whole, rather than a hierarchical one; for a similar reason, the leadership of local churches in the New Testament appears to be collective, not individual (cf. the plural of “bishops” in [Php 1:1](#), etc.; the idea of the “monarchical episcopate”, where a congregation is led by a single bishop, only emerges later with Ignatius in the 2nd century).

In this connection, we may also briefly investigate the concept of “apostolic succession”. This is clearly not (and cannot be) related to the promise of Mt 18:20 in any fundamental way – it cannot be derived from it, nor can it limit or condition it. But if we go back to 150 AD or even to the end of the 2nd century, we can say that it was a very prudent, obvious, and practical concept which effectively protected the early Christian communities from the invasion of Gnostic schisms and various foreign doctrines. The bishops of the time were only a few generations removed from the apostles themselves (e.g. Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in the second half of the 2nd century, was a disciple of Polycarp, who was a disciple of the apostle John) and therefore constituted a very concrete, personal link to the apostles. It is in light of this that we must read the drastic statements of Ignatius about the role of the bishop – this bishop was likely appointed by one of the apostles personally. At the same time, it may become clear that in later decades and centuries such a link became weaker and weaker, since even a family father cannot guarantee that his children will follow in his footsteps (as we see in many places in the Old Testament), let alone his grandchildren or great-great-grandchildren. Thus, for example, we see that in the middle of the 4th century a large number of the so-called “earthly

gods”, who were by all means appointed according to the apostolic succession, followed the Arian doctrine, which denied Jesus’ divine nature in the full sense of the word. This shows that succession alone was not enough; the arguments of Scripture were needed to refute the heresy. But that is another debate, which we will not enter here. Nevertheless, in the light of Mt 18:20, we can also affirm the opposite: since the temple of God is something created by Jesus himself, it should be self-evident that all Christians must have a certain respect for (if not “agreement with”) the historical forms and manifestations of such communion with Jesus, especially if a certain continuity in this can be traced over longer periods of time. The union with Christ transcends both geographical and temporal boundaries, and connects us in spirit to all the “living temples” of all times.

In Catholic and Orthodox practice both ecclesial models, the sacramental and the hierarchical one, are coinciding and complementing each other: a true sacrament is only that which is consecrated by a duly authorised ecclesial minister; the priest, on the other hand, derives his authority from the power of the Sacrament of Holy Orders. In the contemporary charismatic tradition, however, we usually encounter only the second model (without the principle of apostolic succession, but sometimes with comparable substitutes), which, because of its reliance on the power of the spiritual charisms, can lead to an even stronger concept of the authority of church ministries, and therefore potentially to their greater abuse.

Evangelical-teaching model

Let us look at the third church model, which could be provisionally called the evangelical-teaching model, and which is characteristic of Protestantism. It was formed in response to the problems and abuses that arose from the previous two models. A typical Protestant understanding could be stated as follows: “The Church is where the word of God is proclaimed, and the sacraments are correctly shared.” Some would add the third criterion: “And where church discipline is exercised.”

This model corresponds, on the one hand, to Jesus’ definition of the Church as founded upon the gospel of the Messiah (Mt 16:18), which is also attested in many other places in the New Testament ([1Co 1:17](#); [3:10-11](#); [Eph 2:20-21](#); [Col 1:5-6](#), etc.), and, on the other hand, it is linked to the emphasis which the early Church placed on the importance of the teaching ministry (see above) as that which expounds and proclaims the word of God. (Again:

the high value of the episcopal office by Ignatius and later was derived primarily from the fact that the bishop proclaims or “preaches” the gospel, the word of God.) For Luther, the Church is “a creature of the word of God”, with preaching playing the key role, so much so that in this tradition it assumes the role of the main “sacrament”. In the sermon, the divine word of the gospel comes alive and is actualized again and again; this proclamation gathers the Church and, in a sense, creates it *ex nihilo*. Wherever the preached gospel meets open ears and hearts, the Church is created. In this tradition, the sacraments of baptism and the Lord’s supper are an extension of the sermon, they are “the visible word of God” (Primus Truber), that is, the proclamation of the gospel by other means. And in both kinds of proclamation Jesus is personally, actually, and actively present.

From the point of view of the fundamental definition of the Church given by Jesus in Mt 18:20, we can say the following about this model. As mentioned above, the mere “gathering into the name of Jesus” implies an involvement in Jesus’ mission. To be gathered “into the name of Jesus” presupposes that the gospel has already been proclaimed and accepted among those who are gathered. In this sense, the gospel is the foundation of the “gathering”, or “assembly”, as we read in Mt 16:18. On the other hand, this assembly is established precisely for the sake of the same mission, for the sake of further proclamation of the gospel in word and deed, by the sacraments and by miracles, that is, by all means available. Jesus, who is at the centre of the assembly, is therefore the initiator and leader of the mission, and at the same time the Teacher of his disciples. (It should be remembered that “disciple” is the main New Testament designation for “Christians” – the latter term appears only three times in the whole corpus.) As such, Jesus is first and foremost the one who *speaks* or *teaches authoritatively*. This becomes especially clear in the light of the insight that Jesus himself is the Word of God, as we read in the Johannine writings, and in the light of the gift of the Holy Spirit, who will “teach” Jesus’ disciples after his departure ([Jn 14:26](#); [1Jn 2:27](#)). The purpose of “gathering to Jesus” must therefore necessarily be “to hear his voice” ([Jn 10:27](#)). And to return to the image of the rebuilt temple: in the inner sanctuary the living voice of the living God was heard ([Nu 7:89](#)). In the new sanctuary, therefore, this cannot be lacking: the living God is a speaking God, and in his sanctuary he speaks in a living way to his people and thus revives them.

Similarly to what was said with the previous models, the fundamental reality of the promise of Mt 18:20 both enables and limits also the evangelical-teaching church model. The fact that Jesus himself is personally present in his Church enables preachers to proclaim the biblical word in faith and trust that through it, Jesus himself will speak personally to those present. The latter would be impossible without the former. (And according to the New Testament, we should add to preachers/teachers also the prophets who speak by direct inspiration.) This living voice nourishes, encourages, and warns the community; it is built up with it ([1Co 14:3-4](#)). But preaching, teaching, and prophesying, have their limit there: they are strictly in the function of establishing that simple communion with Christ which is built up also before and beyond them. Preaching, teaching, or prophesying does not derive its authority and its ability to communicate the word of God from some special, autonomous, independent promise of God, nor from the qualities of Scripture as a written text, but from the first, broader promise and gift of Christ's presence among the "two or three", which overflows into the manifold proclamation of the word of God. This dependence particularly excludes any preaching, teaching, or prophesying that does not flow directly from Christ who is present there and that does not return to him as the direction to which the addressees are summoned. Examples of this would be various teachings on general "biblical principles" or discussions on "biblical prophecy" that are frequent today. Preaching that is not Christ-centred, however learned, practical, well-meaning or "anointed", is not in the function of simple communion with the Risen One and, strictly speaking, does not belong to the Church, since it is foreign to it *by nature*. Such preaching does not constitute the Church and therefore cannot claim the authority it otherwise has.

Conclusion: The Church as an active reality

To sum up: in Mt 18:20 and its context (including Mt 16:19) we see the primary, essential form of the Church which can be described as the establishment of the sanctuary of God. To this belongs a "thick description" of "gathering in/into the name of Jesus", which includes various aspects of the disciple's walk with Christ and the mission in this world.

In the light of this fundamental promise, all the subsequent promises – "This is my body" ([Mk 14:22](#)), "I am with you to the end of the age" ([Mt](#)

[28:20](#)), “The one who hears you hears me” ([Lk 10:16](#)), “The word of God is living and active” ([Heb 4:12](#)), etc. - also take on their force as actual promises of Christ’s real presence among his own.

We can also attempt to provide some more concrete content to this primal form of the “assembly of Jesus”. It should be characterized by, or necessarily require, at least two things: the calling on the name of Jesus and the hearing of his word. Both should be present, at least in a nutshell, as mentioning of his name and relying on the promise of the gospel, but usually in full form, as prayer and worship, and as reading of shorter or longer passages of Scripture and active listening to the teacher’s voice through the Holy Spirit.

If all this is valid, then we can also say the following: in its essence, the Church has the nature of an active reality, not of passive object. The Church is a particular “happening”, a dynamic “activity” with a special quality, not something static or solidified.

We must therefore distinguish between the primary or fundamental form of the Church, which can exist on its own, and the various ecclesial modes that flow from it. These modes are the Church conditionally, whereas the primary form is absolute. All other church forms are conditioned precisely by the extent to which they are in direct relation to the first form and in its function. As we have seen, this first form, on the one hand, makes them possible, establishes them and gives them authority and credibility, but on the other hand, it also limits or even abolishes them if they deviate from their fundamental function.

At the same time, this distinction explains why different church forms or modalities can feel so self-confident in themselves. It is because Jesus is indeed personally present in them through various ways or “means of grace”. There is no greater confirmation and certainty to be received. But when this certainty and confidence turns into disregard of other forms and exaltation above them, it means nothing less than forgetting the original, fundamental form of the Church, which is encompassed in the simple promise of Jesus. It means forgetting the fact that all other ecclesial forms are secondary, dependent, derivative – that they are not the one and only source which is binding upon all and which conditions all. Humanly speaking, this source cannot be appropriated by us, and it demands of us especially one thing: *obedience of faith* that reaches out to the good promise of Jesus.

Considering all this, it would be profitable for all contemporary church forms to enable, cultivate and promote this primary, simple meeting in the name of Jesus in various ways, since it is from it that everything else what the Church might be is fed, united and given vital force – if it is to be truly the Church.

Objections

This concept of the Church departs from established patterns in many ways, and various objections may be raised against it. The following is an attempt of answering some of the most expected ones.

1. Impoverished vision

Objection: What is presented here is an impoverished, minimalist vision of the Church that lacks some essential elements.

Answer: This objection is hardly sustainable when we consider what the promise of Jesus is really about – nothing less than the establishment of God’s temple. Can anything be greater than that? Can we add anything essential to this gracious dwelling of God among people? If we look at it this way, it becomes clear that everything else can only be add-ons, supplements, “offshoots”, not essential elements. Can the Church really be anything more than Jesus being humbly, covenant-faithfully present among two or three of his own?

2. Cause of division

Objection: Accepting such an understanding of the Church and its essence would cause more chaos and division in Christianity.

Answer: If we understand the concept of being gathered “in/into the name of Jesus” correctly, this cannot happen, because it is a vision of radical submission and self-abolishment before Jesus. There is no better remedy for the divisive human self-will than the Crucified One, him personally. Who can unite the Church if not he alone, who is her head? (If anyone else wanted to unite her, it would be the Antichrist, as Solovyov wrote.) What could unite her more than focusing on such simple, radical obedience and submission to Jesus?

3. Erosion of respect for existing church forms

Objection: Such an understanding would cause a further decline in respect for the existing church forms and ministries.

Answer: On the contrary, it would give the church ministries, sacraments and teaching their true honour vis-a-vis the establishment of God's simple sanctuary around Jesus. It would provide their proper place and a new vitality for their work. It would indeed also set them a boundary, which they do not want to cross anyway if they really want to serve Jesus as branches on the vine.

4. Dichotomy between visible and invisible Church

Objection: With this understanding, we are again dealing with the spurious and potentially misleading pitting of the invisible Church against the visible Church, since we can never know the true motives of those who gather in the name of Jesus.

Answer: While we cannot know the motives of those who gather, it is sufficient for practical purposes to consider what those who are gathered state as their intention. If anyone is feigning true piety, that is his personal problem; a meeting which has an explicit aim of gathering and being united with Christ must be accepted and respected as such. And such meeting is certainly visible.

5. Nominal gathering "in the name of Jesus"

Objection: What about meetings which are nominally held "in the name of Jesus", but in their content Jesus and his mission are absent, or almost absent, and other objectives are in the foreground (various "spiritual experiences" or "devotions" not bound to Jesus and his gospel, political, cultural or other social objectives, etc.). After all, wars, torture, and a host of other blasphemous crimes have been committed "in the name of Jesus" throughout the history.

Answer: This objection is more serious than the others since there is no simple answer to it. We have stated that, in principle, the explicit and clearly stated *intention* of those who gather is sufficient, namely, that they gather to Jesus for the sake of simple fellowship with him and for the sake of continuing his gospel mission. We have also said that such a gathering is characterised by calling on the name of Jesus and hearing his voice. Of course, it is possible for those gathered to explicitly affirm such an intention,

to also pray and quote some Bible verse, but the main content of the gathering to be directed elsewhere because of this or that “church culture” (which determines what and how “things are done”, what is normal, and what can be expected). Here we cannot but judge from case to case and observe where the whole is leading to, regardless of any disturbing or deviant particularities. Is it going in the direction of building God’s sanctuary and expanding his kingdom or not? Does it glorify Jesus and his work on earth, or does it obscure and push it aside? Particularly difficult cases are meetings where the “calling upon the Name” and “the word of God” may be numerous in quantity, but the intentions are moot (e.g. prayer meetings in support of a particular political cause or leader, or prayer meetings aiming at a particular psychological state, perhaps an emotional relief, usually labelled as a “spiritual experience”). Here we simply need the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, who also gives us the gift of discerning of spirits ([1Co 12:10](#)). One criterion might be this: can we simply replace the mention of Jesus in a particular meeting with a reference to a general concept of “God” or deity, so that all the specifics of Jesus (the incarnation, teaching, death on the cross, resurrection, gift of the Holy Spirit, Great Commission) are lost? If the answer is yes, then unfortunately, for all the pious talk and embellishment, that gathering does not appear to be a gathering to Jesus, i.e., the Church. It is especially worth paying attention to the specific of the cross of Jesus, which is always the most stumbling element of the gospel, and the one people tend to avoid. But “to gather ... the children of God who are scattered”, Jesus had to die ([Jn 11:52](#)); therefore, the same cross necessarily marks the way of life of the disciples ([Mk 8:34](#)) who gather “in his name”. Where the cross is emptied of its power, abolished, there cannot be an assembly of Jesus ([1Co 1:17](#); [Php 3:18-19](#)).

6. Uncertain, opaque, uncontrolled

Objection: The Church, understood in this way, is something uncertain, opaque, and no one controls it.

Answer: If we are really dealing with the dwelling of God himself among people, this is the way it must be. God’s dwelling place is not “made by human hands” ([Ac 7:48](#)), it cannot be established, controlled or conditioned by men; one can only humbly enter into it, as someone who has heard the good word of the gospel promise. Man cannot manage God. As we have said, Jesus can establish such holy space anytime and anywhere, and he can also abolish it anytime and anywhere. The fact that

man is truly involved in such miracle does not mean that he has dominion over it, but rather that he has a *service/ministry* in connection with it – that is, a subordinate but active role. This role is similar to that of the Levites in the Old Testament; they were entrusted with carrying the various parts of the Tabernacle of the Testimony. When they stopped at a certain place and assembled the tent from the parts, the cloud of God's presence would fall upon it. Their setting up and assembling did not create the cloud, but the cloud came by the gracious promise and covenant of God. Their work *according to God's instruction* was merely the enactment and concretization of God's gracious manifestation in the world. It was the consequence of God's grace, not its condition. This is also why Jesus' appearing among his own is not something uncertain, since his promise regarding that is so clear and firm that we can fully rely on it. But the totality of God's miracle requires the individual and the community to assume an attitude of humility and obedience, and to persevere in it.

7. Exclusion of established church activities from the Church

Objection: Does such a definition not exclude from the Church the many activities which naturally belong to it, such as care for the poor, distribution of Christian literature, development of ecclesiastical art, theological discussions, and so on?

Answer: The usefulness of each definition is demonstrated by its application. Before considering these and many other similar areas, it should be noted that the above definition broadens the concept of the Church to include some practices that are usually considered peripheral. For example, family evening prayer or two friends meeting together to read and meditate on a particular book of the Bible during their lunch breaks at work – these are the Church in the true, strict sense of the word.

The above-mentioned activities remind us that in a Christian community, especially if it is larger and more developed, there are activities which do not correspond to the definition of Mt 18:20, at least not in the literal sense, but which are nevertheless necessary for the mission of the Church as a whole and for practicing of concrete ways of communion with Christ. If these activities are organically integrated into the whole "economy" of God's coming down and dwelling among people as its constituent part, they can rightly be said to represent the Church in the broader, secondary sense. The definition of the Church in Mt 18:20 can help us understand what is the centre on which everything else depends, what

is that “activity with a special quality” which is the Church by nature, and towards which those secondary activities must also be directed, at least in some way, if they are to be the Church in the broader sense of the word.

In judging those secondary modes of church, two criteria can be pointed out.

1. The substantial proximity to the fundamental form of the Church, the necessity/utility of a particular activity for the practicing of the fundamental form, determines the “level” of its “church mode”. For example, care for the poor is substantially very close to the fundamental reality of the Church, first because it follows a direct commandment of Christ, but also because it establishes a communion with Christ hidden in the poor ([Mt 25:31–46](#)). A church circle of fans of a particular sport, on the other hand, does not have this proximity and necessity, although it can be used for evangelism.
2. The basic form also determines the concrete way in which all the secondary activities are to be carried out. If these activities are to be truly Church, at least in that second, broader sense, they must be carried out “as if Christ were in the midst of them” – because, in fact, he is. This means that these activities cannot simply follow professional or other secular standards, criteria, and models, but must be imbued with the knowledge of the presence of Jesus among and in the co-workers, and in the whole of the process. This will, for example, cause that such activities will be carried out with a very specific Christian ethos which is foreign to mere professionalism. Here the previous two examples can be reversed: the care for the poor can be carried out in a purely bureaucratic, formal way, without seeking communion with the poor and therefore with Christ – such an activity is not the Church, because it could also be carried out by a government social welfare service without any difference. But a circle of lovers of a particular sport can be a means of deepening sincere bonds among fellow Christians, with a vision of celebrating God’s beauty and presence in the creation; at the same time, it can be open to the inclusion of others who do not yet know God’s love. At the very least, such a “circle” could be very close to the Church.

The activities of various “parachurch” organisations (charitable, social, educational, publishing, activist, etc.) can also be provisionally included in

the broader form of the Church defined in this way, in so far as they meet the above criteria.

As before, a simple classification is not possible; we can only observe each individual case and look for signs, reflections, and proximity to the fundamental nature of the Church. Any such judgement will necessarily depend on the individual's convictions, experience, and attitudes. It is perhaps right to conclude that the outer edge of the Church is never clearly defined in advance, but can only be discerned each time anew in the light of the personal Shekinah of him, who comes between the "two or three".

8. Reading out of context

Objection: The understanding of Mt 18:20 as presented above ignores the context. This verse refers only to church discipline (cf. [Mt 18:15-19](#)) and cannot be taken as a general statement.

Answer: There are a number of facts that argue against such a narrow understanding.

1. Verses 15-17 are in the singular, while the beginning of v. 18 is quite unnecessarily in the plural, indicating a change or broadening of the subject. While v. 18 functions in this context as an explanation of the previous three verses, we have the same promise earlier in [Mt 16:18-19](#), where the context is much broader: it is the grounding of the Church on the faith confessed by Peter, and the astonishing promise of the authority and power that this Church will have, namely, a direct contact with God ("heaven") that will enable her to make authoritative decisions about what is permissible and what is not. The fact that Mt 18:18 is related to the only other mention of the Church in Mt 16:18-19 further confirms the ascertainment that Jesus is concerned with the "fundamental definition of the Church" in Mt 18:18-20.
2. Verse 19 begins: "Again, truly I tell you ..." (NIV), indicating a new thought.
3. The words "about anything they ask for" make it unmistakably clear that this is not just about disciplinary matters, but rather about any request. The semantic range of the promise is broadened at least here, if not already in v. 18.
4. The mention of "two" in v. 19 and "two or three" in v. 20 is also not logical in view of v. 17, where the perspective was already explicitly broadened to a larger group than two or three. Obviously, there is

a new thought or a different semantic aspect here. Vv. 19–20 (or perhaps even 18–20) are thus a further explanation of the power of the harmonious fellowship of just two or three disciples of Jesus. For these are enough to establish an authoritative “testimony” about him.

5. Jesus’ statement in v. 20 is the obvious climax of the passage. Both in view of the wider context (the fundamental promise of Christ’s presence at the beginning and at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, see above), in view of the potent similarity with Old Testament eschatological promises (cf. Joel 2:27; Zec 2:14-15, etc.), and also in view of the parallel with the forementioned rabbinic saying, it is simply impossible to restrict the meaning of v. 20 to the problem of vv. 15–17 alone. All these parallels call for a broader interpretation.
6. Verse 21 continues not with church discipline but with the issue of forgiveness, which is a related topic, but not the same. Vv. 19–20 (or perhaps even v. 18) must be likewise understood as a related, but not identical topic to vv. 15–17, since, after all, those verses also follow a related, but by no means identical topic from vv. 6–14.
7. In general, it is well known that Matthew often combined otherwise independent sayings of Jesus into a loose topical cluster (compare e.g. [Mt 6:19–24](#) with [Lk 12:33–34](#); [11:34–36](#); [16:13](#)). Several interpreters explicitly argue that vv. 19–20 are a separate saying of Jesus that Matthew topically compiled into the fourth long discourse of Jesus in his Gospel, which comprises the whole of chapter 18. This further proves that the meaning of vv. 19–20 should not be limited to the immediate context.

To insist on the narrow interpretation is therefore irresponsible to the text as it stands before us.

The broad interpretation presented here is supported by all the Bible commentaries I have been able to consult. These are as follows:

- J. P. Lange & P. Schaff: *A commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Matthew*, Charles Scribner & Co., New York, 1865
- R. T. France: *Matthew: An introduction and commentary* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries), InterVarsity Press, Nottingham, 1985
- C. S. Keener: *The IVP Bible background commentary*, InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 1993

- C. S. Keener: *Matthew* (The IVP New Testament commentary), InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, 1997
- U. Luz, & H. Koester: *Matthew*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2001
- D. A. Hagner: *Word Biblical Commentary, Vol. 33B: Matthew 14–28*, Word Incorporated, Dallas, 2002
- W. D. Davies & D. C. Allison: *A critical and exegetical commentary on the Gospel according to Saint Matthew*, T&T Clark International, London; New York, 2004
- W. F. Albright, & C. S. Mann: *Matthew: Introduction, translation, and notes*, Yale University Press, New Haven; London, 2008