

Rediscovering the community of God

Two thousand years ago, Jesus founded a community of faith. He called people into this community to serve a common purpose and to form a common identity. While Jesus' original vision for this community was well defined and well understood, we've lost sight of what Jesus intended.

Let's explore Jesus' original vision, so that we can reconnect with the identity and purpose to which Jesus calls us.

Imperial worship

In the first century, Roman emperors encouraged subjects right across the empire to engage in emperor worship. The Caesars thought to unite the allegiance of the empire's subjects by uniting them in worship of the emperor.

Shrines, altars and temples to the emperor were built right across the empire.

“Of the seven cities mentioned in Revelation 2-3, five have imperial priests and altars (all but Philadelphia and Laodicea) and six have imperial temples (all but Thyatira). At Pergamum an imperial temple was established as early as 28 B.C. The city was so central to the imperial cult that Revelation describes this city as having the ‘throne of Satan.’ In short, a Christian in Asia Minor could not avoid the Imperial Cult.”¹

Now, listen to this inscription, made on a government building in Asia Minor in 6 BC, which is two years before Jesus was born.

“The most divine Caesar . . . we should consider equal to the Beginning of all things . . . for when everything was falling (into disorder) and tending toward dissolution, he restored it once more and gave the whole world a new aura; Caesar . . . the common good Fortune of all . . . The beginning of life and vitality . . . All the cities unanimously adopt the birthday of the divine Caesar as the new beginning of the year . . . Whereas the Providence which has regulated our whole existence . . . has brought our life to the climax of perfection in giving to us (the emperor) Augustus . . . who being sent to us and our descendants as Saviour, has put an end to war and has set all things in order; and (whereas,) having become (god) manifest /PHANEIS/, Caesar has fulfilled all the hopes of earlier times . . . the birthday of the god (Augustus) has been for the whole world the beginning of gospel /EVANGELION/ concerning him.”²

¹ Retrieved from <http://readingacts.com/2010/04/02/the-roman-cult-of-emperor-worship/> on 3 January 2016.

² Claiborne, S., 2008. Jesus for President, p 70.

Listening to these claims, you'd be forgiven for thinking that this inscription was a Christian inscription describing Jesus Christ. The claims for the divinity of Caesar August are almost identical to the claims for the divinity of Jesus Christ. And, importantly, these claims were made about Caesar long before they were ever made for Jesus. This tells us something really important.

The claims for Jesus made by Peter, John and, especially, Paul, were explicitly framed in contradiction to the imperial claims.

- Jesus is God (John 10:30) — and Caesar is not.
- Jesus is the beginning of all things (Colossians 1:16) — and Caesar is not.
- Jesus is bearer of life (John 1:4; 2 Timothy 1:10) — and Caesar is not.
- Jesus is the reconciler and restorer of all things (Colossians 1:20) — and Caesar is not.
- Jesus is making all things new (Revelations 21:5; 2 Corinthians 5:17) — and Caesar has not.
- Jesus is the source of perfection (1 John 4:12, 17, 18; Hebrews 10:14) — and Caesar is not.
- Jesus is the saviour of the world (1 John 4:14) — and Caesar is not.
- Jesus is the prince of peace (Isaiah 9:6) — and Caesar is not.
- Jesus is God manifest in flesh (1 Timothy 3:16; 1 John 4:9) — and Caesar is not.
- Jesus is the subject of the true gospel (2 Corinthians 4:4; 2 Timothy 2:8) — and Caesar is not.

When these Christian claims were made, their opponents heard what they were saying and declared:

“... they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus” (Acts 17:8).

So we find that the earliest declarations of Christianity were politically charged. This is a long way from the private practise of religion for an hour a week in a church service that is practised today.

We might ask ourselves, “Why were the earliest declarations politically charged?” To answer this question, we must look at Jesus’ foundational statement about His community of faith.

Jesus’ intention

Matthew 16:18 contains the bible’s foundational statement on the establishment of Jesus’ community of faith.

“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my **Church (ecclesia)**, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the **kingdom (basileia)** of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matthew 16:18).

To get the full impact of Jesus’ statement, we need to unpack the meanings of the two bolded terms.

- The word “church” translates the greek word ecclesia. Ecclesia is a political term. It refers to the citizens who formed the governing assembly in a greek city-state.

- The word “kingdom” translates the greek word *basileia*. *Basileia* means “sovereignty” or “reign.”

If we take these concepts together, we can understand that Jesus is declaring that the sovereign reign of God is forming its community of citizens. Jesus was declaring the kingdom of God—i.e. the sovereign reign of God—would reign in the hearts of the community called to be citizens of this kingdom (Luke 17:20).

Jesus’ *ecclesia* is explained in a word picture in Revelation. Christ is pictured as walking among His *ecclesia*. They are His people; and He is their god (Revelation 22:3). They are His subjects; and He is their King (Revelation 19:16). People called to this *ecclesia* were to abandon their loyalty to the empire; abandon their loyalty to their tribe; abandon their loyalty to their families; and replace their national, cultural, tribal and family loyalty with loyalty to the sovereign reign of God (Revelation 7:9).

Paul describes that Christ is the head of His community, the *ecclesia* of God.

“Christ is the head of the body, the *ecclesia*. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might be preeminent” (Colossians 1:18).

The key image is that of Christ heading up His *ecclesia* (community), who are subject to the sovereign reign of God.

Members of Christ’s community:

- Have a new family — Colossians 1:2
- Are called to be priests within the kingdom — Revelation 1:6
- Are named as heirs of the kingdom — Romans 8:17

Mission drift

In the centuries that followed the first, Jesus’ *ecclesia* suffered mission drift. That is, Jesus had a defined vision and mission for His community, but that community developed other ideas that muddied Jesus’ purpose.

The idea of Christ’s *ecclesia* started to drift when a Christian thinker declared that bishops, elders and deacons were an intrinsic part of the body of Christ. Someone else took that further and declared that the hierarchical relationships between the bishops, elders and deacons were an intrinsic part of the arrangement. Then someone else determined that this hierarchy constituted an institution, which they called “the church.”

Then the very identity Jesus promised to His followers were absorbed by this institution called “the Church.” Think about the word “ecclesiastical.” Ecclesiastical refers to religious professionals employed by the Church. Ecclesiastical is contrasted with the “laity,” who are the common members of the Church.

Ecclesia was the name describing the the subjects of God’s sovereign rule. Yet “the Church” took that name and identity, and applied it to its own paid professionals.

So, do you see what’s happened here? “The Church” stole our name and identity!

Lessons learned

Jesus' declaration established the kingdom of God. Jesus calls us to join the community who are subject to God's sovereign reign. Jesus Christ is the head of this community. It is a community who give both *political* and *spiritual* allegiance to our Lord Jesus Christ. This is a community that is comprised of every tribe, tongue, people, and nation (Revelation 5:9), yet is united by the Spirit of the living God (2 Corinthians 3:3).

Jesus calls us away from false religion. He calls us to abandon loyalty to the harlot (Revelation 17:4, 5). He calls us to come out of Babylon (Revelation 18:4).

Jesus warns us to place our political loyalty in the reign of God, not the reign of the kingdoms of this world (Revelation 13:1, 2). He warns us not to bear the mark of the beast (Revelation 14:11).

Jesus says to each of us:

“Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness” (Matthew 6:33).