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### But What About Those Gates of Hell?

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**F**or over forty years, the church has been the center of my spiritual life. My parents took me there when I was young, and since I became a teen, I have gone by choice. All right, part of that was because I had to walk past this boy's house, and if he saw me going by, he hurried to get ready and come, too. But, for various reasons, I have attended church nearly every Sunday for forty years.

But why do I say, “attended church”? If asked, I would say that the church is not something I can “attend”. The church is the people who gather together to worship God. The church is you and me. I know that, but it’s never been important to me to differentiate. Now I find myself talking about “going to church” and wondering, what do I mean? The building? The service on Sunday? I’m not sure. In some ways, the word “church” is nebulous to me—no distinct boundaries or meaning. Is that good or bad? I wonder what Jesus meant when He used the word in the first place.

Getting out my concordance, I discover that the word “church” is first used in Scripture in Matthew 16:18 when Jesus says, “Upon this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.”

It turns out that Jesus didn’t invent the word. Apparently, “church” in those days meant “ones who were called out” and was used for groups of people who met together for a specific purpose. Explore it further, and it appears the church is a group of people who join together on the basis of their faith in Jesus Christ.

So far, so good. But what about the second part of the verse? The part about the gates of hell. The words sound strange to me. Hell has gates?

I pull out my concordance again and look up the word “gate”. There were a lot of gates in those days. Every city that was worth the name “city” had walls with gates in them. You could only get in or out of the city by using a guarded gate.

But walls and gates are defensive. Somehow I always pictured hell as attacking. Aren’t the gates of hell attacking?

Yet gates don’t attack. They are put in place for defense. Battering rams could be broken into firewood on some gates without making a dent. Gates are for keeping people out. Or in, if you’ve taken prisoners. (Which is why the two spies appreciated the rope ladder they used to leave Rahab’s house in Jericho, and Paul was grateful for an improvised basket-elevator escape from Damascus.)

Faced with the walls and gates of hell, however, I picture something indestructible. Walls that cannot be scaled. Gates that open only to let people in: nobody gets out. Rope ladders and baskets are useless here.

So when Jesus said, “I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it,” He meant the gates won’t be able to stop the church from crashing through and letting people out!

The church is an unstoppable battering ram?

The church? But that means me! And you! After all, together we are the church!

While my mind tries to absorb that idea, I check to see if Jesus said anything else about the church.

Only one thing, recorded in Matthew 18:17. He’s talking about dealing with problems, how we’re to go and talk to anyone who sins, and if he/she won’t listen, we’re to take two or three others with us and try again. And if that doesn’t work, we’re to tell the church, or assembly, and the person had better listen or else. But then Jesus goes on to say that whatever we (the church) agree on, shall be done, even in heaven—even if the church is only two or three believers!

So the church is much more than a building or a service or even a group of organized people. The church is God’s weapon for fighting Satan and rescuing people who are captives of hell.

And if I believe in Him, then I’m a member of His church. And that makes me...God’s warrior?

Me? I don’t even know self-defense. And I stopped watching hockey games because of all the fighting. Warrior?

Turning back to my concordance, I discover those are

the only occasions on which Jesus talked specifically about the church. But in Acts and the rest of the New Testament, church is mentioned by name 106 more times. Churches in homes, churches being added to by God, churches that were not treating members properly, churches that were meeting or not meeting Christ's expectations, churches being persecuted, churches carrying on the battle or not.

One things become clear. A battle exists between the church of Christ and the forces of evil for the souls of men, women, and children.

I feel overwhelmed. Unworthy. I think of how little time I have spent preparing myself for battle. And how little time I have been in the midst of the fighting. Now I'm faced with my own responsibility for ignoring the battle.

I've always acted as though being a Christian meant going to church on Sunday, getting involved with a committee, and choosing your friends among the church people. Everybody's happy. And if people comes to church who have never made a commitment to Christ or who aren't mature (i.e. not on a committee), I'm willing to encourage them to get involved. Join a Bible study, or a committee. Make new friends in the church. Lose bad habits and become one of us.

But soldier? Warrior? Battering ram? Me?

Maybe I am the only one who didn't realize this. Or perhaps it has something to do with living in North America. Maybe because most of us have little personal experience of the wars and violence and evil that are tearing other countries apart, we thought everything was okay. We may hear the noise of battle, but what has it to do with us?

In my musing, I remember the ideals I had when I was 20 and thought I could change the world. I see what little difference I've made, and I am sad.

As I continue to study the church, I learn that 95 per cent of North American churches grow by getting people from other churches. I learn that some denominations have actually lost numbers even while the main population has been growing. I read that a recent Gallup pole shows only 2 per cent of all people who call themselves evangelical Christians have ever led anyone to Christ. And 92 per cent of all those evangelical believers say they have never had any training in leading others to Christ.

Some battering ram! I realize with a sudden pang that we in North America are not even making a dent in those gates.

But I also learn there is a church in Korea that has rapidly grown to 700,000 members. I listen to a taped interview of an ex-policeman in the Ivory Coast who leads a church of 30,000 people. I hear of other churches in countries throughout the world where churches are exploding with numbers beyond our wildest dreams.

I try to tell myself that it is different in other countries. But I know I am only making excuses. The truth is that I have used my involvement in the "church" to cushion myself from the world. Instead of reaching out in power and faith, I have built my own walls. I have been afraid to get involved in the battle. Even now, I hesitate.

I hear of one woman in Korea who wanted to reach the people in her new apartment building for Christ. After several unsuccessful attempts to make friends, she decided to spend an afternoon in the elevator. She carried groceries for a mother with young children. She helped several elderly people. By the end of the day she had served many people. She continued to look for ways to get to know people. She talked to them about their concerns. Within a few weeks, she started a Bible study group. With her help, people came to know Christ and to grow in their faith.

She just made friends with people and looked for ways to show them she cared? Lord, if it's that easy, maybe I could help!

I realize the cold brick walls and expensive doors of my neighborhood hide ordinary people who are struggling to find happiness and peace and release from their bondage to the ruler of this world.

I want to join the battle, Lord. It's not too late, is it? Even though I'm over forty, may I still enlist? I want to be your warrior.

Let me see, I know there's something about armor in my Bible. I just have to find the verses. Give me a second, Lord.

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