

Dear Donald,

Thank you for writing us at Christian Questions Radio. You asked what the term “church” refers to in Matthew 18:17 since the church was not started until after Jesus’ death and resurrection.

Chapter 18 of Matthew opens with a question from Jesus’ disciples, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” Jesus said, “Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 18:3) Rather than answer their question, he told them that unless they had humble hearts and manifested them through their actions, they would not be able to enter the kingdom of heaven. He then proceeded to give them examples of the kind of lives they were to lead if they were to become part of his “body.” As we know from scriptures (1 Corinthians 12:12-27), the heavenly body of “the Christ” is composed of many members with Jesus as its head. The body members are referred to as the “church” (1 Corinthians 12:28). Because we are striving to become part of the heavenly body of Christ, we are referred to as the “church.” (The Greek word for “church” is *ecclesia* and means a calling out, a religious congregation, a community of members on earth or saints in heaven or both.) When Jesus was talking to his disciples he was in the process of setting up his future church. Soon his disciples would be without their Master. Therefore, he was giving them guidelines for interacting with their brethren. In Matthew 18:15-17 Jesus tells them what to do when someone continues in a known sin. If the offender refuses to listen to one brother or sister privately, then the entire group of brethren (the “church”) would be responsible for speaking to him. The admonitions that Jesus provided in this particular instance and in others throughout his ministry are valuable lessons for the entire church, which began with the apostles and is culminating with us today at the end of the Gospel Age.

We hope we have clarified Jesus’ reference to the “church” in Matthew 18:17. By Jesus using this word, he was referring to the eventual development of his body members. Please write us again.

Sincerely,  
Christian Questions Radio