

*The Church: God's Pilgrim People*

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From his roots in Africa, David Zac Niringiye takes us on the journey of a pilgrim people, helping us appreciate what the church is at all times and in all places. This introduction provides a biblical theology that tells the story of the people and promise of God through Moses, of the kingdom of God in Christ, and work of his people by the Holy Spirit.

## Was or is the church Jesus' idea?

The leading question is: Was or is the church Jesus' idea? Did Jesus have in mind the birth of a community that would be identified as church? And was that "church" what would constitute the new people of God, in continuity with ancient Israel? Then come the follow-on questions: What does "church" that is true to Jesus' idea of church look like? And is the church in its diverse forms today what Jesus conceived?

There are only two passages in all the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – in which Jesus made explicit reference to the church. The first is Matthew 16:17-19.

*Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."*

The second, also from Matthew, 18:15-20:

*If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you. If they listen to you, you have won them over. But if they will not listen, take one or two others along, so that "every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses." If they still refuse to listen, tell it to the church; and if they refuse to listen even to the church, treat them as you would a pagan or a tax collector.*

*Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*

*Again, truly I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything they ask for, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them.*

Experts in the languages in which the Gospels were originally written tell us that it is difficult to determine exactly what words Jesus used that are translated "church" in these passages. The English word "church" is the translation of *ekklesia* in the common Greek language that was spoken in first-century Palestine; it meant a citizens' assembly in a city to decide the matters that affected their welfare – a political gathering or simply a gathering. It was therefore also frequently used instead of the term *sunagoge* – translated "synagogue", the local gathering of Jews for preserving and nurturing the Jewish faith during the post-exile period. The term *ekklesia*, however, does not have an inherently religious (or later on, cultic) meaning. It is uncertain whether Jesus used a Hebrew or Aramaic word that translates *ekklesia* for temple. He may have used the Hebrew words *edah* or *qaha*, or the Aramaic equivalent, *edta*, which simply means the community of Israel. Yet another possibility is the Aramaic word *kenista*, which could be used of either a local Jewish

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David Zac Niringiye (PhD, Edinburgh) is the retired assistant bishop of the diocese of Kampala, Church of Uganda. Currently a fellow in the Faculty of Social Sciences at Uganda Christian University, he has a distinguished career as a theologian, mission leader, pastor, HIV and AIDS activist, and organizational development consultant. Called “the foremost evangelical Christian thinker/theologian today,” Niringiye teaches at churches and conferences in Africa, Europe and North America while continuing his work of peace and social-political justice in Uganda.

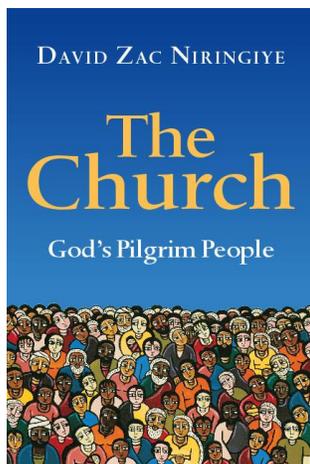
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community or just the Jewish people.

Whichever of these words Jesus may have used, they all communicate the idea of a community identifiable by their gathering as well as by what happens when they gather, as was the case with the Israelites. In the affirmation “I will build my church”, Jesus makes clear whose initiative and responsibility it was to bring the community into being and to whom the community would belong. Like the citizens’ gathering and Israel, they would have a shared consciousness of the group’s identity. However, their identity was grounded not simply in their belonging together, but rather in the one to whom they belonged. The community was to derive its character not from its membership but from the one who called it into being. Jesus was to be the author and reason for gathering. Furthermore, he pledged to be personally present in the gathering. It was Jesus’ gathering in every sense: his people, and by extension, God’s people.

Unfortunately, the contemporary church scene speaks more of the presence of a denominational character than that of Jesus. I fear that in a lot of instances it is not Jesus gathering his own but rather us gathering those who are like us. Is it not true that the churches as we know them today – such as the ones described in the Introduction – are associations rather than assemblies of Jesus? Don’t the rivalry, competition and conflict, and our inability to work together reflect the fact that our primary rootedness and calling as communities is in our worldly credentials – ethnic, social, regional, structural, stylistic and formal – and not in Jesus?

– From Chapter 1, *“Becoming and Being Church, the People of God”*



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## “David Zac has captured both the rise and fall of God’s community.”

“Every journey I have taken with Bishop Zac has been both challenging and life-giving. This book is no exception. Like a knowledgeable safari guide, Bishop Zac points out the highs and lows as he takes us on an extraordinary biblical journey through what it means to be the community of God’s people – from creation to new creation. Godly discontent over the mismatch he has seen between much contemporary church and the biblical vision of a community of faith, hope and love drives Bishop Zac to ask us to take stock of our part of the community of God. To be read carefully, prayerfully and humbly by all who profess Christ’s name, wherever they are in the world, so that the community of God may reveal Christ to the world, not hide Christ from the world.”

– **David Williams**, bishop of Basingstoke, UK

“Congratulations to David Zac! This is a brilliant piece of work. The subject is timely, coming at a time when the church is expanding rapidly, yet declining and disintegrating with equal speed. David Zac has captured both the rise and fall of God’s community in a technical yet easily readable manner. *The Church* is theologically sound, historically accurate, but more importantly, culturally relevant for the church’s new center of gravity – Africa. What comes out clearly is that the church is, as David Zac puts it, a community in the Spirit, a dwelling of God in God! No gates of hell can prevail against it. If you are interested in the development of the church, this is a great read. If you care little about the church, here is a must-read.”

– **David Oginde**, presiding bishop, Christ Is the Answer Ministries, Nairobi, Kenya

“David Zac Niringiye is for me a modern hero of the faith. He has been so helpful to our community of hundreds of students and all nations and ages at the heart of Oxford. When he gave up his role of bishop to work for the cause of justice in Uganda and beyond, some feared he might forget the church. But this brilliant book shows the opposite is true. He writes movingly about the people of God on the journey of God and invites us winsomely to join in the advancing kingdom of God. Get this book to get in touch with your destiny.”

– **Charlie Cleverly**, rector of St. Aldates Church, Oxford, UK

“As an evangelist among people of other faiths, I have struggled with the huge chasm between our understanding and teaching of who we are as God’s people in the world and our practice of church. Reading this book will help us to define the essence of our existence

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# ENDORSEMENTS

as a people of God in the world. Bishop David Zac makes a bold clarification of a rather hazy view of the church as God's pilgrim people that has been clouded with our propensity to settle for mediocrity."

— **Canon Francis Omondi**, All Saints Cathedral Nairobi, Anglican Church of Kenya, chairman of CMS Africa, director of the Sheepfold Ministries

"Here is a narrative-based theology of the church, the people of God, from the life experience and mind of an African theologian. It offers a prophetic challenge to common Christian confusions about and distortions of the church. Every Christian concerned about the state of the church should read it."

— **Roger E. Olson**, Foy Valentine Professor of Christian Theology and Ethics, George W. Truett Seminary

"It is so refreshing to read what Bishop David Zac Niringiye, long-term friend and brother, has to say about the church. On the one hand I am personally warned of how easy it is for us, lost in the exuberance of our inventions and redefinition of the church, to lose our bearing with regards to God's purpose for the church. On the other, I am reminded of why the church today should be a continuing story, journey and witness of the people of God to his kingdom. In a contemporary age in which the identity of the church has been re-created in our image—be it ethnic, social, economic or whatever else, with all their attendant paraphernalia, Bishop Zac's clear word is a call for sober reflection regardless of our church tradition. Rather than just a lamentation of how church easily slides from being 'all about God' to 'all about us' or even just 'me,' this is a prophetic call to rediscover and return to God's original purpose for the church in relation to his kingdom. I commend this book to all who long for the church to be the church as communities of God's people 'announcing and demonstrating the kingdom of God by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit.'"

— **Femi B. Adeleye**, director of church partnerships, Global Centre Christian Commitments, World Vision International

"I can think of few people from whom I would rather hear about the church than from David Zac Niringiye from Uganda. He is biblically focused, intellectually careful, diagnostically truthful, courageously honest, emotionally bold, relationally sincere and publicly fearless. Hearing his voice and seeing his life as a brother and mentor has changed my life. This book will hopefully open that experience to many others as well. If the body of Christ is to be God's light and salt in the real world, we need Bishop Zac to confront and inspire us to new and vigorous life."

— **Mark Labberton**, president, Fuller Theological Seminary