

## **“Jesus Will Build His Church” (Matthew 16:13–20)**

I love my wife, Lori. She is the perfect woman for me. When I reflect back on our life together, I marvel at the wife, mother, friend, and ministry partner she has been. The sacrifices she has made for our family and the churches that we have served are incredible. Her loyalty and faithfulness have been supernatural expressions of God’s love and grace to me. Although I have a long ways to go as a husband, I love Lori with all my heart. Consequently, I value her opinion and I want to please her and prioritize what’s important to her. Yet, as much as I love Lori, I love Jesus more. He has forgiven all my sins and has given me eternal life as a free gift. Even though I have a long ways to go as a disciple, I love Jesus with all my heart. As a result, I care about what He thinks is important. What Jesus prioritizes, I want to prioritize because I want to please Him.

Even a cursory reading of the New Testament reveals that Jesus values and loves His bride—the Church. This is an inescapable truth of Scripture. The person who loves Jesus and yearns to prioritize Him must be passionate about His Church. The church is Jesus’ only program. He has invested everything in the success of His church. Therefore, we too must sacrifice everything to build His Church.

If we’re going to talk about the Church, we need to begin at the beginning. Matthew 16:13–20 contains the first mention of the Church in the entire Bible.<sup>1</sup> Fittingly, the first mention of the Church is on the lips of Jesus—the Head of the Church. So before we get too far into our discussion of the Church, we need to be absolutely straight on the identity of its Head. Interestingly enough, that’s exactly where Jesus begins with His disciples on this occasion when He reveals to them for the first time His plan for a brand-new entity called the Church.

Matthew begins his account in 16:13: **“When Jesus came to the area of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man<sup>2</sup> is?’”** In the course of their travels, Jesus and the disciples have come to the region of Caesarea Philippi, twenty-five miles north of the Sea of Galilee and actually the farthest north Jesus ever traveled in His earthly ministry. They have been up and down the territory so most of Israel has had time to form an opinion about Jesus. So Jesus kicks off this monumentally important exchange by asking His disciples what people think about Him. Now it is important to realize that Jesus never poses a question to gain information. When He asks a person something, it is a test.<sup>3</sup> That’s what occurs here.

In 16:14, the disciples answer Jesus’ question: **“Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”** The disciples offer a sampling of the current views about Jesus, and they are all pretty complimentary. But none of them is the correct answer, so Jesus asks a follow-up question, **“But who do you say that I am?”** (16:15)<sup>4</sup> Jesus is most interested in who His disciples think He is. Jesus emphasizes the word “you” (*humeis*) so Matthew places it as the first word in his question. Jesus is saying, “Who do YOU say that I am?”<sup>5</sup> This is a question that every person must still face and answer today. How you respond to Jesus’ question will determine your eternal destiny.

Simon Peter<sup>6</sup> answers Jesus’ question: **“You are the Christ,<sup>7</sup> the Son of the living God”<sup>8</sup>** (16:16).<sup>9</sup> Good old Pete nails this one! This confession of the identity of Jesus Christ is one of the greatest statements in the entire Bible. By calling Jesus “the Christ,” Peter identifies Him as the Messiah—the Anointed One.<sup>10</sup> Peter is saying that Jesus is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament promises and prophecies. He is the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world (see John 1:29). Peter also recognizes Jesus as deity by calling Him, “the Son of the living God.”<sup>11</sup> This statement means He shares the very essence of deity with the Father. All that makes the Father the eternal God belongs to the Son. So Peter covers Jesus’ humanity and deity. If you have never placed your faith in Christ, echo Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God. This will ensure that you spend eternity with God.

Jesus' response to Peter in 16:17–18 is legendary: **“You are blessed, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but 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 overpower it.”** Jesus insists that Peter didn't come up with his confession; rather, it is straight from God. Jesus then proceeds to utter one of the most controversial statements in all of Scripture: “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” There's a play on words here. The word “Peter” in the Greek is the masculine *petros*; the word “rock” in the Greek is the feminine *petra*. Jesus is saying, “You are a rock, and on this rock I will build my church.”<sup>12</sup> This statement has been taken in several ways. Catholics interpret Jesus' words to mean that Peter was the first Pope. In reaction to this view, many evangelical scholars argue that this rock refers to Jesus Himself, Peter's confession, or faith in Christ. But the text is clear. Jesus is saying, plain and simple, “You are a rock [Peter], and upon this rock [i.e., you] I will build my church.” Does this mean that Jesus made Peter the Pope? No, it means that Jesus made him a Christian. Jesus builds His church on people. He himself is the foundation, the corner stone (1 Pet 2:7), and we are the building blocks that He uses. He used Peter to build His church, He used the other apostles to build His church, and today He uses us. Jesus isn't saying that Peter is the foundation of the church; He's saying that he is the first rock in the building. He was the first rock because he was the first to make the statement, “You are the Christ.” Today, God continues to build His church on people who confess Christ. Many years after this event, Peter wrote a letter we call 1 Peter. In 2:4–5, Peter declared that believers are those who have come to the living stone (Jesus Christ) and as living stones are now being built up into a spiritual house.

So how does Jesus build His church? Let's take an example from Philippi—quite possibly the best church in the New Testament. How did Jesus build His church in Philippi? With (1) a business woman, (2) a demonized slave girl, and (3) a pagan jailer. The conversions of these three individuals are found in Acts 16. The Lord opened Lydia's heart to respond to Paul's words (16:14). Paul commanded the demon to come out of the slave girl (16:18). Finally, after Paul and Silas were jailed, God decided to blow the doors off the cells with an earthquake and convert the jailer (16:31). In all three accounts Paul was Jesus' instrument. Jesus built His church in Philippi, and He will build it in Thurston County. If He can build possibly the greatest New Testament church with a business woman, a demonized slave girl, and a pagan jailer; He can build a church in and through you.

Jesus finishes Matt 16:18 by stating that the gates of Hades will not overpower the church.<sup>13</sup> Four hundred years ago, the KJV translated this phrase “the gates of hell.” Consequently, many Christians have assumed that Jesus is saying that Satan and the hordes of hell will not be victorious over the Church. While that's certainly true, that's not what Jesus is saying here. “The gates of Hades” is a reference to death.<sup>14</sup> Hades is the equivalent of the Old Testament Hebrew word *sheol*, which means simply “the grave.”<sup>15</sup> Jesus is saying, “The power of the grave will not overpower the church.” The church will prevail, even though its members should be killed by their enemies. But why did Jesus say this? Because He knew something His disciples didn't know. Drop down just three verses to 16:21: “From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day.” To us, this is old news. We've heard it a thousand times. But to the disciples, this was first they had heard about it. Jesus, the Messiah, the Son of God, was going to die. Now connect 16:18 with 16:21. When Jesus said the power of death will never overpower His church, He said it because when He rose from the dead, He broke open the gates of Hades. Up until Jesus' day no one had ever escaped from the land of the dead. But Jesus did. And He came out holding the keys in His hand. That's what Rev 1:18 says. “[I am] the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.” How do you get the keys to Hades? You break the gate wide open. You die and then you come back from the dead. And that is why the gates of Hades—death itself—can never overpower the church. Because Jesus Christ has died and come back from the dead He holds in His hand the keys to the gates of Hades.<sup>16</sup>

In 16:19a, Jesus continues His conversation with Peter and the disciples by declaring: **“I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.”** In order to understand this statement, we must ask: What’s a key? A key is a mechanism or device that opens something. I have a key ring that has seven keys—the biblical number of perfection, completion, maturity. Coincidence? I think not! On my key ring, I have keys for my vehicles, my house, my mail box, the church, and my neighbor’s house. If I have the key to my car I have the authority to unlock it, to get in and to take my car and drive it away. If I have the key to my house, I have the authority to open it, to unlock it, to go inside and once I’m inside to lock the door behind me if I feel like it. Whoever holds the keys has the authority to open and close. When my neighbor gave me the key to his house, he gave me authority. If I gave you my key ring, I would be giving you authority. Jesus is saying, “I am going to give you some keys.” This means He gives you His authority.

In the ancient Near East, the kings would have a palace and in the palace they would have a storeroom where they would keep their money and grain. It was an important place. The king would pick out a trusted servant to whom he would give the key to the storeroom. That was the highest honor the king could bestow. In those days the servant who had the key would wear it on a chain around his neck so it would be obvious to all that he had the keys of entrance into the palace and into the treasures of the king. If the steward were doing his job he would never take the chain off from around his neck. He wore it continually as a sign of the authority given to him by the king. The man who had the key was the man who could let you inside to see the king or he was the man who could refuse you entrance. That’s what’s behind Jesus’ statement when He says, “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven.”

The keys of the kingdom of heaven are a reference to the gospel. Whenever you offer the gospel to another person you are opening the door of heaven. If a person goes through that door he or she is saved. If a person refuses the open door, he or she has closed the door to heaven. You have opened it and he or she has closed it. We see how this played out in Peter’s life. After the death and resurrection of Jesus, on the day of Pentecost, Peter preached a simple sermon in Jerusalem and unlocked the doors for 3,000 people who came to be saved. In Acts 10 and 15, we see how God used Peter to unlock the door for the Gentiles to come into the church. God used Peter to open the doors of the kingdom for multiplied thousands of people to enter in. Today, the church’s job is the same: We’re to be opening the doors of God’s kingdom, so that all who want to believe in Christ may enter in.

Jesus concludes His discussion about keys by stating: **“Whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you release on earth will have been released in heaven”** (16:19b). Scholars debate about how these phrases should be translated. The verbs are written in the future perfect passive tense, and the NASB accurately translates “will have been.” In other words, we’re doing the “binding and releasing” in response to God’s will, not our own whim. This is another example of our stewardship (or management) responsibility. God has given us the authority and the responsibility to do His will; it’s a job we must take seriously. We therefore must take initiative to bring as many people as we can into the Church. Peter is the one who is given authority to declare the terms under which God grants entrance to, and exclusion from, the kingdom.

Matthew concludes this account in 16:20 by stating, **“Then he [Jesus] instructed his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.”** Many Christians are tempted to view this verse as binding for today. However, nothing could be further from the truth. Jesus is merely saying it is the wrong *time* and the wrong *place* to proclaim Him because He came to die at a particular time and place. If Jesus allowed the disciples to announce that He was the Messiah, He would have been arrested immediately. Yet, Jesus knew it was not His time. He wants to be arrested during Passover week, which is the prophesied timing. Furthermore, Jesus was prophesied to die in Jerusalem with the rest of the prophets. He was determined to fulfill the time and the place that would be the fulfillment of the Old Testament Scriptures. Daniel had even prophesied the very day that He would enter Jerusalem, and Jesus fulfilled that very day.

Although this episode concludes with Jesus instructing His disciples not to tell anyone that He is the Christ, today He commands you and me to proclaim Him to all creation. How do we do this? *First, share the good news of Jesus with those you know.* The simplest way of doing this is by sharing how God has changed your life. No one can argue with personal experience, right? We must be tolerant and accepting. When you have exhausted opportunities to share with people you know, look for other open doors. This past week, I was dressing down in the men's locker room at Thrive Fitness. One of the employees walked in and I struck up a conversation with him. I asked him if he was a believer and he said he wasn't, but he had a church background. I engaged him further in conversation while my workout partner, Tim Borchardt, was waiting for me. As we stepped out of the locker room, Tim said, "Did you get your daily contact?" I thought to myself, "Now, that's good!" As a police officer, Tim understands daily contacts. I should too.

*Second, invite people to attend church.* If the people in your life have yet to believe in Christ, bring in reinforcements. Your spouse, family member, coworker, roommate, or friend may not believe in Christ through your gospel presentation, but he or she may trust in Christ at church or through another Christian who is in the community. The average person requires seven to fourteen presentations of the gospel before they finally believe. Hence, the goal must be to surround them with believers. Inviting others to church must become as natural as breathing. Sadly, those who typically invite people are those who have been at a church less than a year. If EBF and our daughter church, The Grace Works, are to reach people for Christ, we need your help. Yesterday, our outreach team went door-to-door in our neighborhood and gave out 242 packages of light bulbs and church invitations for Easter. That is passion and courage! When a church stops rescuing the lost, that church needs to be rescued.

*Third, encourage church planting.* There are over 200 million unchurched people in America, making America one of the four largest "unchurched" nations in the world. This should not be discouraging; it should be exciting! The fields are white unto harvest (Matt 9:37-38)! The problem is: Today of the approximately 350,000 churches in America, four out of five are either plateaued or declining. In an average year, half of all churches don't add one new member through conversion growth. Furthermore, each year at least 3,500 churches close their doors permanently. Only 1,100 to 1,500 are started each year. We do not have too many churches today. We have too few. Specifically, we have too few churches that have God-centered theology, Christ-exalting preaching, and Spirit-empowered mission. We need more. Churches that are doctrinally solid must become more aggressive in church planting. If we fail to do so, we will lose the battle to share Christ in our county.

For several years I have had chronic pain in neck, shoulders and back. My pain stems from many daily hours of typing and heavy weightlifting. My next door neighbor likes to say, "Keith, the advantage to being in constant pain now is that we can smoothly transition into our seventies and eighties accustomed to chronic pain." He may be right. Nevertheless, I've been seeking ways to improve my condition. Fortunately, God brought a masseuse into my small group. My new friend, Robin, has introduced me to the Thera Cane®. This instrument allows me to reach places that I could not normally reach. It allows me to accomplish what I could not accomplish. I am not too proud to tell you, "I need you. The Grace Works needs you. Emmanuel needs you." There are people that we can't reach; there are ministries that we can't accomplish. We need one another. The point of this text is: *The church has been given Christ's authority.* May we live our lives as individuals and as churches with an awareness that we have Christ's authority to accomplish the impossible.

**Scripture References**

Matthew 16:13–20

Acts 13:1–5

1 Corinthians 6:19–20

Ephesians 1:3–14; 2:20

John 11:52

Acts 18:10; 20:28

Revelation 5:9

**Study Questions**

1. What is my view of Jesus Christ (Matthew 16:13–16)? How have my views changed over the course of time? How important is one's understanding of Jesus Christ in his/her personal life and church life? How can I deepen my understanding of Christology (i.e., the study of Christ)? How can I help my children and others understand Christ better?
2. When has God revealed to me new truths about Himself or Jesus (Matthew 16:17)? Where and how did this revelation occur? What do I recall about these specific truths? What did I do in response to these insights? Who did I share these new truths with? What was his/her response?
3. What is my view of the church (Matthew 16:18)? What is Jesus' view of the church? Are my views in line with what Jesus thinks? How important is the church to my own spiritual life? Is my commitment to worship together, walk together, and work together in line with this priority? Why or why not?
4. In what ways am I sharing the good news of Christ with others (Matthew 16:19–20)? What have I done with the keys of the kingdom God has given me? Who do I need to share Christ with? What will I do to cultivate that opportunity this week?
5. What can I do this year to deepen my understanding and commitment to Christ and His church? Where am I particularly strong? How can I enhance these strengths? Where am I weak? How can I improve? Who can help me become the man/woman I need to be? Will I ask this person this week for spiritual help?

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The word church (*ekklesia*) is only used two places in the Gospels (Matt 16:18; 18:17).

<sup>2</sup> In Mark and Luke, Jesus' question leaves out the "Son of Man." Some have understood the title "Son of Man" as a reference to Jesus' humanity and "Son of God" as speaking of His deity. This seems reasonable but it just isn't so. The term "Son of Man" carries with it both the presence of the Jewish Messiah and divine authority (see Matt 12:3–8). Throughout Matthew's gospel, Jesus has been revealed as the Son of Man (8:20; 9:6; 10:23; 11:19; 12:8; 13:37–43; 16:27–28; 17:9–12; 19:28; 20:18, 28; 24:27, 30, 37, 39, 44; 25:31; 26:2, 24, 45, 64; cf. Dan 7:13–14), who is God Himself. Even in the way Jesus posed this question, He is hinting at His identity.

<sup>3</sup> This is one of five occasions where Jesus used a question to elicit a response of faith (cf. Matt 9:28; John 9:35; 11:25–26; 14:10). Roy B. Zuck, *Teaching as Jesus Taught* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 243.

<sup>4</sup> Matthew, Mark, and Luke immediately follow with Jesus' prediction of His sufferings.

<sup>5</sup> The "you" is not only emphatic; it is also plural. Jesus is asking this question of all His disciples. The Greek language will often move words around for emphasis. The plural personal pronoun "you" (*humeis*) stands alone at the very head of the question and it also appears again as an element in the 2<sup>nd</sup> person plural verb (*legete*).

<sup>6</sup> This is the only place in Matthew's gospel that Peter is called by his full name, "Simon Peter" (cf. Matt 4:18; 10:2).

<sup>7</sup> This is the first time anyone in Matthew's narrative has given Jesus the title "Christ," though Matthew himself has used it in 1:1, 16, 17, 18; 2:4; and 11:2.

<sup>8</sup> This is a more definite identification of Jesus as deity than "God's Son" or "a son of God" (Matt 14:33). That title leaves a question open about the sense in which Jesus was God's Son.

<sup>9</sup> This confession is included is also found in Mark 8:29 and Luke 9:20. It should be noted that there had been other confessions of faith prior to this one. In John 1:49, Nathaniel had confessed Christ as the Son of God and the disciples had declared Him God's Son, after He stilled the storm (Matt 14:33). Peter had given a confession of faith when the crowds left Jesus after His sermon on the Bread of Life (John 6:68–69). How then did this confession differ from those that preceded it? To begin with, Jesus explicitly asked for this confession. It was not an emotional response from people who had seen a miracle, but the studied and sincere statement of a man who had been taught by God.

<sup>10</sup> The central theme of the Old Testament Holy Books is the coming of the Messiah to establish the kingdom of God among people. The Hebrew word "messiah" (*meshiah*) means "anointed one." In ancient times, kings, prophets, and high priests were anointed with holy oil to mark their appointment to office. The prophets used the proper name "Messiah" to refer to the One who would be anointed and sent by God—the Prophet–Priest–King whose birth the Holy Books foretold. (The Greek translation of the word "messiah" is *Christos*—which is one of the names of Jesus: Jesus Christ.)

<sup>11</sup> Elsewhere in the Bible the phrase "the living God" is associated with the church (1 Tim 3:15; 4:10).

<sup>12</sup> Wilkins writes, "Jesus intends Peter as the antecedent to 'this rock' on which he will build his church. (i) Jesus' pronouncement is directed toward Peter personally, both before and after the wordplay, and it is unlikely that a change of reference would have been made without some explicit indication. (ii) The copulative 'and' (*kai*) more naturally signals *identification* of the halves of the wordplay than *contrast*: 'You are Peter *and* upon this rock...'. Contrast is necessary if the saying points to the confession or Christ. (iii) 'Peter' is the nearest explicit antecedent to 'rock,' and in general the nearest antecedent is preferred over an implied or more distant antecedent unless something in the context specifies another referent. (iv) The Aramaic substratum almost certainly identifies Peter as the intended antecedent (as does the interchangeability of the terms *petros* and *petra*). The likelihood of Jesus speaking Aramaic on this occasion is more probable than positing that Jesus was speaking Greek. Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew*. NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 562–63.

<sup>13</sup> In the biblical world, the gate of a city was the place of authority. The city's elders would sit at the city gate to conduct the city's business and render decisions on behalf of the citizens. The gate was their city hall.

<sup>14</sup> Wilkins, *Matthew*, 564; R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*. NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 624–25.

<sup>15</sup> A Jew of Jesus' time would have understood this expression as a reference to physical death since Hades was viewed as the place where one went at death. This is a phrase commonly used in the Old Testament (see Job 38:17; Pss 9:13; 107:18; Isa 38:10). It is also interesting that in Greek mythology there was a character whose name was Hades? He was the god of the underworld. Specifically, he was the god of the realm of the dead.

<sup>16</sup> Ray Pritchard, "The Gates of Hell Shall Not Prevail" (Matt 16:18):

[www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/1989-10-01-The-Gates-Of-Hell-Shall-Not-Prevail/](http://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/1989-10-01-The-Gates-Of-Hell-Shall-Not-Prevail/).