

Jesus Reveals the Church
Matthew 16:13-20
Gerry Andersen
Valley Bible Church Adult Sunday School

Matthew 16 continues the theme of opposition to Jesus by the religious leaders, leading Jesus to turn away from these leaders and to focus His ministry on His disciples as He enters the final stage of His public ministry, which culminates in the crucifixion. Matthew 16:13-20 involves Jesus revealing more of Himself and their future as Matthew's account moves toward the crucifixion. This will lead Jesus to reveal to His disciples the work of God in the church (Matthew 16:18), as the gospel will go to the Gentiles.

Jesus' first question to the disciples (16:13-14)

Jesus had recently left the western shore of the Sea of Galilee for the other side of the sea (Matthew 16:5). Now He travels with the disciples to the north to the district of Caesarea Philippi. This area was around 25 miles north of Galilee and the vast majority of the population were Gentiles. It was built by Herod the Tetrarch (cf. Matthew 2:19-22) to honor Caesar. The name Philippi was added to its name in order to distinguish it from the city of Caesarea by the Mediterranean Sea. It was built at the foothills of Mount Hermon (the possible site of the transfiguration in Matthew 17:1-13) and was approximately 1,150 feet above sea level.

By traveling to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus removed Himself from those religious leaders who were opposed to Him. His focus was on ministry to His disciples without the distraction of continued confrontations with the Pharisees, Sadducees and scribes. He began by asking them, "*who do people say that the Son of Man is?*"

This was not the first time that Jesus used the term "*Son of Man.*" It was a Messianic term that was exclusively used in the Gospels by Jesus to describe Himself. Since the disciples had heard Him use these many times before (Matthew 8:20; 9:6; 10:23; 11:19; 12:8, 32, 40; 13:37, 41), they knew that Jesus was asking them who people thought He was and they answered accordingly.

The other synoptic Gospels omit the term "*Son of Man*" and leave the basic essence of the question as "*Who do people say that I am?*" This is because they, unlike Matthew, are writing to a much broader audience, who would be less inclined to understand this term than Matthew's Jewish readers would.

The disciples correctly answered with a variety of perspectives that were held at the time about Jesus. For example, Herod Antipas was one who believed Jesus was John the Baptist, risen from the dead (Matthew 14:2). One popular view was that Jesus was Elijah, due to the Old Testament prediction that God would send Elijah in the future (Malachi 4:5-6; Matthew 3:1-3; 11:9-10; 17:10-13). Many viewed Jesus as a prophet, which explains the association with Jeremiah (the greatest of the latter prophets), or one of the other prophets. Jeremiah, other prophets, and Jesus spoke negatively about the people of Israel during their generation.

Notably absent from the options that Peter spoke of was Jesus as the Messiah. There were no groups of people in the society speculating that Jesus was the Messiah, the coming King of Israel. This reflects the degree of unbelief among the *“evil and adulterous generation”* that Jesus encountered (Matthew 16:4). This is in spite of the vast crowds that had followed Jesus, listened to His teaching, and experienced His miracles.

Jesus’ second question to the disciples (16:15-16)

Jesus then asks them the most poignant question, *“But who do you say that I am?”* The word “you” is in the emphatic position, contrasting the disciples with the people whose speculation about Him was wrong. It is also plural, meaning that Jesus posed this question to all the disciples, not just to Peter, who answered Him.

Peter responded as the spokesman for the disciples, *“you are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”* This declarative statement of Jesus as the Messiah that the Old Testament promised was powerful and significant. He identified Jesus as not only the hoped for Messiah, but also as the Son of the living God. Only Matthew included this additional descriptive, with Mark leaving it off (Mark 8:29) and Luke condensing it to *“the Christ of God”* (Luke 9:20), again showing each writer's adjustment to their specific readers.

The term *“living God”* was used over a dozen times in the Old Testament to differentiate the God of Israel from the dead idols of their enemies. This term was also used by New Testament writers and by the High Priest at the trial of Jesus (Matthew 26:63). Peter clearly spoke about Jesus being the Son of the true God of Israel.

When the disciples began to follow Jesus, it was with the hope that He was indeed the Messiah. When Andrew told his brother Peter about Jesus, he said, *“We have found the Messiah”* (John 1:41). But they grew in their understanding of this as their time with Jesus went on.

Jesus' response to Peter (16:17-19)

Peter is described as blessed for recognizing that Jesus was the Messiah. This is a great blessing because of what it brings, for belief in Jesus leads to eternal life (cf. John 5:24). But Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah was itself a blessing from God, because this ability was not sourced in Peter but in God alone, *"flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven."* There is no ability for any flesh and blood to understand Jesus as the Messiah apart from the Father's revelation of this to him.

Jesus also says, *"I also say to you that you are Peter."* When Peter was first brought to Jesus by his brother Andrew, Jesus changed his name to Peter. *"Jesus looked at him and said, 'You are Simon, the son of John; you shall be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter)"* (John 1:42). Therefore, Peter had been called by this name for some time prior.

Peter is identified by Jesus as *"Simon Barjona."* "Bar" means "son of" in Hebrew and thus the NIV translates this *"Simon, son of Jonah."* However, John 1:42 quotes Jesus as calling him *"Simon, son of John."* This apparent discrepancy is rooted in Matthew's use of a transliteration for the name (converting the spoken Aramaic by Jesus to Greek based on phonetic similarity), whereas John used the closest Greek version of the name, "Joannes," which we translate into English as John.

Jesus uses the name Peter because of the play on words that occurs with the word "rock" in verse 18. The English name "Peter" is a transliteration of the Greek name "Petros." The Greek name Petros means "rock," and translated the common Aramaic name "Kepa." The name Cephas the English spelling of Greek "Kephas," which is a Greek transliteration of the Aramaic name "Kepa" in John 1:42 (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:12; 3:22; 9:5; 15:5; Galatians 1:18; 2:9, 11, 14).

Therefore, the Aramaic name "Kepa" is the source of both the names Peter and Cephas. While Petros commonly meant "stone" in Greek, the Aramaic word Kepa did not denote any difference in size. Therefore, since Jesus did not speak to Peter in Greek, He was not making a contrast between a small stone (Peter) and the Rock (Jesus) upon which the church. This attempted interpretation is driven by the opposition to the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church of Peter being the first pope, giving subsequent popes the authority over the church.

We do not need to make such an artificial distinction in the terms for “rock” to understand that Jesus did not appoint Peter as the head of the Church in Matthew 16:18. The Roman Catholic view of Peter is defective for a variety of better reasons.

If we look at how Peter functioned in the church in the New Testament, it is clear that he was not the one foundation upon which the church was built. In the church dispute at Jerusalem in Acts 15, James played the leading role, not Peter. Peter was not infallible in what he spoke regarding the Christian life. If so, Galatians 2:14 would then show the supposed “the foundation of the church” being rebuked by Paul for his hypocrisy. Peter was married (Matthew 8:14) and popes do not marry. If the first pope could marry, then why later declare that popes and priests could not marry?

1 Corinthians 3:11 clearly declares that Christ is the foundation of the church and no other foundation can be laid. In the sense that the apostles were foundational to Christ’s church (Ephesians 2:20), Peter was not unique. All the apostles shared in this ministry. Even the “keys of the kingdom,” given to Peter (Matthew 16:19), were also given to all the apostles (Matthew 18:18). Peter was called a “pillar” of the church, but along with James and John (Galatians 2:9). He held no more significant position than other apostles.

By stating “*upon this rock I will build My church,*” Jesus declared Himself to be the builder of His church. The emphasis is not upon Peter but upon Christ. He did not say He would build the church upon Peter, since He did not specify Peter but rather “*this rock.*” Using the Scripture to understand what He meant, we see abundant evidence that the rock Jesus spoke of was Himself.

Psalm 118:22 is a key verse in the New Testament, “*The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief corner stone.*” Jesus applied this to Himself in Matthew 21:42 and Peter himself applied this to Christ in Acts 4:11. Peter used the concept of Christ as the rock in his epistle, “*You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For in Scripture it says: ‘See, I lay a stone in Zion, a chosen and precious cornerstone, and the one who trusts in him will never be put to shame.’ Now to you who believe, this stone is precious. But to those who do not believe, ‘The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone,’ and, ‘A stone that causes people to stumble and a rock that makes them fall.’” (1 Peter 2:5-8).*

Paul likewise identified Jesus as the cornerstone upon which the church would be built (Romans 9:33-34; 1 Corinthians 3:11; Ephesians 2:20). Since God frequently used the analogy of a rock to depict the God of Israel (Deuteronomy 32:4, 15, 18, 30-31, 37; 2 Samuel 22:2; Psalm 18:2, 31, 46; 28:1) then it stands to reason that Jesus would use such a figure of speech in regard to Himself, rather than to use it for Peter.

The second revelation from Jesus is the coming establishment of the church. Jesus described the church in the future tense, therefore the church did not exist when He spoke. While the word church (EKKLESIA) meant any assembly of people called out for a purpose, in the context of the New Testament, it meant all true believers in Jesus. The church would be established with the coming of the Holy Spirit in Acts 2:1-11. That Jesus called this assembly, *“my church,”* there is no doubt that He was referring to the church of which He would soon become the head.

We can have the utmost confidence that the church of Christ will be built and that *“the gates of hades will not overpower it.”* Hades is the abode for departed spirits and is a synonym for death (Matthew 5:22; 11:23). No power of death or the evil one will prevail against the church. In spite of attack, corruption, compromise, syncretism, governmental alliances, and many varieties of evil surrounding and within the church, the Lord will deliver His people to the kingdom.

In Matthew 16:19, Jesus specifies that He will give Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven. The analogy of a key implies the control of who enters. Without a key, one is locked out. However, even with Peter himself, we saw that his confession of Jesus as the Messiah was sourced in the gracious revelation of God the Father. Therefore, Peter did not determine who was in the kingdom of heaven, but rather who has the means by which access to the kingdom of heaven is granted.

The obvious key that Peter would possess is the gospel of Jesus Christ. Just after Peter told the high priests that Jesus was the rejected stone which became the chief cornerstone, he exclaimed, *“And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved.”* (Acts 4:12). Peter was given the opportunity to provide the knowledge of Jesus by which unbelievers could repent and by faith enter the kingdom of heaven. These keys were not only given to Peter but also to the other disciples and indeed to all believers in Christ, who throughout the generations would preach the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for the redemption of all who believe from the penalty of sin.

The meaning of “*whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven*” is dependent upon the proper observation of the Greek tense and voice used. What is translated as “*shall have been bound*” (ESTAI DEDEMENON) and “*shall have been loosed*” (ESTAI LELUMENON) is a future, perfect, passive construction used to designate what will happen based upon something else that has occurred.

This leads to the English translation of the NASB of “*shall have been,*” which while slightly awkward, preserves the best sense of the literal meaning of these words of Christ. What had already been determined in heaven will become manifested upon earth. In other words, it is the church that carries out heaven’s will, rather than heaven simply ratifying the decisions of the church.

Hence Jesus promised success to Peter, and by extension, the other disciples and the rest of His followers throughout the church age. Peter would be instrumental in preaching the gospel to those in Jerusalem (Acts 2), and to the Gentiles (Acts 10). Others, such as Philip would bring the gospel to Samaria (Acts 8) and Paul, who would bring the gospel to Europe (Acts 16). The good news of the gospel is the means by which the kingdom of heaven is opened to mankind.

The reference to binding and loosing has nothing to do with some ecclesiastical judgment or control over God’s people. The same gospel that draws people into the kingdom of heaven, also alienates people as well. We see this with the ministry of Peter in Acts 4 with the high priests and in Acts 8:14-24 with Simon the magician. As we are faithful to the gospel, believers in Christ participate in this promise to Peter, for even in our generation, the Lord is opening the door to the kingdom of heaven to many through the faithful proclamation of the gospel message. Through the same gospel message, the unbelief of others is confirmed, according to the sovereignty of God.

Jesus’ warning for the disciples (16:20)

The disciples understood that Jesus was the Messiah, but Jesus warned them to tell no one about this. This is consistent with His frequent admonition to those to whom He ministered that the tell no one about what He had done (cf. Matthew 8:4; 9:30-31; 12:15-16). He would later tell Peter, James and John to tell no one about the transfiguration (Matthew 17:9). Jesus’ purpose in each case was to delay the opposition against Him, to provide more time for His public ministry. This generation of Jews had rejected Him and His focus had become His ministry to His disciples.

Conclusion

Matthew 16:13-20 has been appropriated as the key text to prove the establishment of a pope, of the false teaching of apostolic succession, and of the magisterial authority of church tradition. Not only does this section not teach this, these doctrines are inconsistent with the rest of the New Testament. Peter does not function as the head of the church, but rather in his own words as *“your fellow elder”* (1 Peter 5:1). There is no succession to the apostles for they formed the foundation of the church, which was completed by the time of Paul’s epistles. *“So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone”* (Ephesians 2:19-20). The word of God has been delivered to us through the apostles and prophets in the New Testament, *“which was once for all handed down to the saints”* (Jude 3).

The beginning of the revelation of the mystery of the church is significant. It is clear that the church is not the equivalent of the kingdom of heaven. The church will be built by Jesus with the coming of the Holy Spirit after the rejection of the Messiah by Israel. God’s plan to bless *“all the families of the earth”* (Genesis 12:3), will be accomplished through the church. Those who believe in Jesus during the church age will join with the true Israel who by faith will populate the coming kingdom.

The most essential question for all mankind is this question by Jesus to Peter, *“But who do you say that I am?”* The sincere acceptance or rejection of Jesus as the Messiah is at the core of saving faith and deliverance into the kingdom of heaven. Once we accept that Jesus is *“the Christ, the Son of the living God,”* we become in a position to be a disciple, one who learns from the revelation of God. When we evangelize, the essential question is not what spiritual truths they know, but rather who they believe Jesus is.

Just as the true gospel message does not call upon people to clean up their lives in order to believe in Jesus, it does not call upon people to learn in order to believe in Jesus. We cannot educate ourselves into the kingdom of heaven. Once we begin to recognize Jesus as the Christ, we can begin the lifelong process of learning all of what He has done for us in the depth of His mercy and grace, which will only serve to grow our faith.