

Chapter 65: “Who Do You Say that I Am?”

Matthew 16:13–20

More than we realize, relationships are built on words. Certainly, relationships require more than words, so that one of the worst betrayals in a relationship occurs when someone’s words do not live up to his or her actions. Yet, while relationships require more than words, relationships never permit less than words. Jesus himself has explained the reason for this in that our words are the fruit that arises from our hearts (e.g., Matt. 12:33–37). It is perhaps no surprise, then, that one of the most important passages in the Gospel of Matthew revolves around the words that people say about Jesus, and what Jesus says about his people. From this, our Lord teaches us to *confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God*.

What Others Say about Jesus (Matt. 16:13–14)

Once again, Matthew gives us geographical information about Jesus’ location by informing us that he had come with his disciples into “the district of Caesarea Philippi” (v. 13a), a “pagan, Hellenistic city” northeast of Galilee.¹ This time, however, it is unclear why Jesus has gone here, and Nolland may be correct that this is only “a simple historical memory marking the fact that this occasion was in some way an important watershed for the disciples.”²

Here in Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asks his disciples a simple question: “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (v. 13b). This is an important question, since the entire passage revolves around the question about what different people are *saying*. Jesus begins by asking about what others say, then he addresses what the disciples say, and finally Jesus says something to the disciples through Peter. In response to this first question, the disciples offer a range of responses: “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets” (v. 14). Importantly, the disciples only offer positive suggestions (as opposed, say, to the opinions of the Pharisees and Sadducees). Herod himself had believed that Jesus was John the Baptist, raised from the dead (Matt. 14:2). Given the great personal authority of John the Baptist, it is not surprising that some would confuse Jesus with John. Then, Malachi had prophesied that Elijah the prophet would return “before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes” (Mal. 4:5). According to this suggestion, Jesus would be acknowledged as a forerunner to the day of God’s judgment against the enemies of his people. It is less clear why the people would single out Jeremiah among the other “prophets,” but France plausibly suggests that the reason may lie in Jeremiah’s ministry “as a prophet of doom, and in the sustained opposition he encountered among his own people,” as well as for the way that Jeremiah

¹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 615.

² Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 658.

“incurred fierce hostility.”³ If so, then the people may be recognizing just how unpopular Jesus’ message has been among the religious leaders.

Yet, while these suggestions are all positive, we should note that even these positive ideas fall far short of the reality. Calvin, observing this point, writes, “Hence we perceive how great is the weakness of the human mind; for not only is it unable of itself to understand what is right or true, but even out of true principles it coins errors.”⁴ Doubtless, the people who held these opinions believed that they were thinking ascribing a great amount of honor to Jesus. In reality, though, their ideas fell so far short of the truth that Jesus must inquire further of his disciples to see if they would guess closer to the mark, which he will do next.

What You Say about Jesus (Matt. 16:15–17)

Matthew writes, “He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’” (v. 15). Importantly, both the word for “them” (αὐτοῖς; *autos*) as well as the word “you” (ὑμεῖς; *humeis*) are in the plural, making it clear that “this question had been addressed to all these men, not just to one of them.”⁵ As we observed in the previous passage, the Gospel of Matthew portrays the disciples as moving from having no understanding to gaining understanding, as exemplified when the disciples did “not yet perceive” (Matt. 16:9) and “fail[ed] to understand” (Matt. 16:11), but then ultimately “then... understood” (Matt. 16:12) the meaning of Jesus’ warnings about the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Thus, by asking the disciples who *they* believed Jesus to be, Jesus was expecting “that the disciples themselves will have a more adequate view of his mission than the popular estimate they have quoted.”⁶

Therefore we read that “Simon Peter replied, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God’” (v. 16). As many commentators note, it is clear that Peter is speaking as a representative for all the disciples, since Jesus had posed the question to all twelve rather than to Peter alone.⁷ In Peter’s confession of Jesus as the Christ (i.e., Messiah or “Anointed One”) and as “the Son of the living God,” it seems clear that he is working from Old Testament understandings of the anointed offices of prophet, priest, and king, and to acknowledge some kind of unique relationship between Jesus and God. It is difficult to know exactly what Peter believed in this moment, but, given what Jesus says about the source of Peter’s knowledge in the next verse, there is no reason to believe that his knowledge was inaccurate, as Calvin observes: “though Peter did not yet understand distinctly in what way Christ was the begotten of God, he was so fully persuaded of the dignity of Christ, that he believed him to come from God, not like other men, but by the inhabitation of the true and living

³ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 616.

⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:287–88.

⁵ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 643.

⁶ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 617.

⁷ e.g., Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 620; Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 643.

Godhead in his flesh.”⁸ Still, while Peter may have had a clearer understanding of the answer to this question than the others,⁹ the subsequent passage will demonstrate that Peter nevertheless thoroughly misunderstands the significance of what he has confessed (Matt. 16:21–23).

Jesus replies to Peter’s confession with high praise: “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah!” (v. 17a). The word for “blessed” here (μακάριος; *makarios*) is the same word that Jesus had used in the Beatitudes in Matthew 5, suggesting the idea that Peter has been “filled with the divine spiritual blessing, the possession of the essential soul treasure which produces eternal happiness and joy.”¹⁰ This was not a lucky guess to a trick question, but an answer that flowed from a blessed soul that had come to know Jesus in some sense truly, even if not exhaustively.

Jesus continues: “For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven” (v. 17b). Here, Jesus contrasts two possible sources of knowledge: flesh and blood (i.e., knowledge drawn from human understanding) vs. “my Father who is in heaven” (i.e., knowledge communicated by divine revelation). As lofty praise as the people may have imagined they were giving Jesus by thinking him to be John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets, the truth reached infinitely higher. Thus, Calvin notes “that the minds of men are destitute of that sagacity which is necessary for perceiving the mysteries of heavenly wisdom which are hidden in Christ; and even that all the senses of men are deficient in this respect, till God opens our eyes to perceive his glory in Christ.”¹¹ Peter has recognized Jesus’ identity truly—not because of his own cleverness, but because of the gracious revelation of God himself.

What Jesus Says about his Church (Matt. 16:18–20)

Like Peter’s confession about Jesus, so also Jesus’ response to Peter is extraordinary: “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (v. 18). Beyond being extraordinary, this response has also served as one of the most controversial passages in the New Testament regarding the division between the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Church. At issue is the wordplay Jesus makes between Peter’s name (Πέτρος; *Petros*, meaning “rock”) and the phrase “on this rock” (ἐπὶ ταύτῃ τῇ πέτρῳ; *episode tautē petra*; *petra* also meaning “rock”), where Jesus promises to build his church. Does Jesus promise to build his church upon Peter, or on some other rock? Roman Catholics cite this verse as proof that Jesus gave primacy over the church to the Apostle Peter, and, therefore, to the Church in Rome, which Peter founded. Then, Roman Catholics draw from this an understanding of the nature of the Church which recognizes an Apostolic succession that hands down this primacy to every subsequent bishop of Rome (that is, each pope) in every generation. Protestants have demonstrated in at least one of two ways that the Roman Catholic interpretation of this passage cannot be sustained.

In the first way, Protestants classically noted the grammatical distinction between Πέτρος (masculine) and πέτρῳ (feminine). As John Calvin wrote, “the gender of the noun was intentionally

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:289.

⁹ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 617.

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 623.

¹¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:290.

changed, to show that he was now speaking of something different.”¹² Some have further argued that “the masculine πέτρος denotes a detached rock or boulder, and that the feminine πέτρα signifies a rocky cliff.”¹³ If so, then the argument runs to insist that Peter is one rock that makes up an entire rocky edifice. While this argument is possible, it may not be the best reading of the passage. It is true, as even Augustine pointed out (as quoted by Calvin) that “it is not πέτρα (*petra*, a *stone* or *rock*) that is derived from Πέτρος, (*Peter*.) but Πέτρος (*Peter*) that is derived from πέτρα, (*petra*, a *stone* or *rock*).”¹⁴ Nevertheless, there is some question about whether the distinction of rock vs. rockface is clear in the Koine Greek in which the New Testament was written, especially since the Aramaic in which Jesus would have spoken these words would not likely have made such a distinction.¹⁵

The second way is exegetically stronger by observing that Jesus does not bestow this blessing on Peter alone or in distinction from the other apostles, but that Jesus speaks to Peter as a representative for the other apostles. As noted earlier, Jesus asked this question to *all* his disciples, and not only to Peter. Thus, when Peter responds, he functions as a representative for all the others. So, when Jesus insists that “on this rock I will build my church,” calling Peter the “rock” is a figure of speech called a synecdoche, where a part stands for the whole (e.g., “hired *hand*”). Contrary to the modern interpretation of this passage by the Roman Catholic Church to establish a primacy in Rome, the early church understood this passage as a defense of the unity of the church, as John Calvin noted:

What if I reply with Cyprian [of Carthage; d. 248 AD] and Augustine [of Hippo; 354–430 AD], that Christ did not do it to prefer one man to the others, but that he might so commend unity to the church? For so speaks Cyprian: “In the person of one man the Lord gave the keys to all, to signify the unity of all; the rest were the same as Peter was, endowed with an equal share both of honor and of power; but the beginning arose from unity that the church of Christ may be shown to be one.” Augustine says: “If the mystery of the church had not been in Peter, the Lord would not have said to him, ‘I shall give you the keys’; for if this was said to Peter alone, the church does not have them. But if the church has them, Peter, when he received the keys, was a symbol of the whole church.” And another passage [from Augustine]: “After all had been asked, only Peter answers, ‘Thou art Christ,’ and it is said to him, ‘I shall give you the keys,’ as if he alone received the power of binding and loosing; since, being one, he said the former for all and received the latter with all, impersonating unity itself. Hence, one for all, because the unity is in all.”¹⁶

According to this manner of interpretation, Protestants do not need to prove a different referent for “this rock” in order to escape the Roman Catholic claim of Petrine and Roman superiority. Rather, Protestants may simply point to the teaching about the unity of the church within the early church

¹² Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:296.

¹³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 625–26.

¹⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:296.

¹⁵ e.g., Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 470.

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John Thomas MacNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols. (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1960), 1106 (§4.6.4).

and observe that modern Roman Catholic claims undercut that unity by differentiating Peter from the disciples, rather than seeing him in union with the others. It is not that Protestants destroy the unity of Peter’s church in Rome by rejecting Roman Catholicism, but that Roman Catholicism destroys the unity of the church of Christ (“my church”) by separating Rome from the rest.

This second manner of interpretation also helps to connect this passage with other passages in the New Testament about the foundation of the church. For example, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 3:11 that “no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.” Elsewhere, however, he declares that the “household of God” (i.e., the church) was “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20). Later on, John wrote about the New Jerusalem (symbolic for the church) that “the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb” (Rev. 21:14). In the first passage, Jesus Christ alone is the foundation, and there is no way for any other foundation to enter the picture. In the second passage, the apostles and prophets are the foundation, while Christ is the cornerstone. In the third passage, all twelve apostles serve as twelve foundations. When the Scriptures speak about the foundation of the church, Jesus Christ plays a preeminent role. Certainly, he shares that with his apostles (and prophets); however, neither this passage nor the New Testament as a whole knows anything about a preeminent role for Peter himself.¹⁷ Furthermore, “Any link between the personal role of Peter and the subsequent papacy is a matter of later ecclesiology, not of exegesis of this passage.”¹⁸

The phrase “gates of hell [ᾗδης; *hadēs*] shall not prevail against it” (v. 18b). While acknowledging that the “gates of hell” may sound like a reference to the strongholds of Satan, Carson argues convincingly that this phrase appears elsewhere in the Old Testament to describe “death and dying” (Job 17:16; 38:17; Ps. 9:13; 107:18; Isa. 38:10): “Because the church is the assembly of people Jesus Messiah is building, it cannot die.”¹⁹

Next, Jesus makes promises to Peter about the keys of the kingdom: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (v. 19). Whatever we may make of the “keys,” it seems clear that the keys function for the binding and loosing that Jesus mentions here. This is an extraordinary power, to be sure; however, we should not imagine that Jesus is promising that the tail will wag the dog by giving men on earth authority over the decrees of heaven. Instead, this is just the opposite, so that William Perkins correctly observes that this “is nothing but a ministry of service

¹⁷ “In the primary or basic sense of the term there is only one foundation, and that foundation is not Peter but Jesus Christ himself (I Cor. 3:11). But in a secondary sense it is entirely legitimate to speak of the apostles, including Peter, as the church’s foundation, for these men were always pointing away from themselves to Jesus Christ as the one and only Savior. Striking examples of this are found in Acts 3:12 and 4:12. In that secondary sense Scripture itself refers to the apostles as the church’s foundation (Eph. 2:20; Rev. 21:14).” (Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 647–48.)

¹⁸ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 622.

¹⁹ Carson, “Matthew,” 420–21.

whereby men publish and pronounce what Christ binds or looses.”²⁰ In this case, it is significant that Jesus’ pronouncement about the power of binding and loosing is connected to Peter’s confession, so that the church’s to power of preaching and teaching Jesus authoritatively seems to be in view.²¹

We should also notice two similarities between this passage and Matthew 18:15–20, where the process of church discipline is more in view. There also, Jesus promises that “whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven” (Matt. 18:18), and although he does not repeat the term “keys” in conjunction with this pronouncement, the idea of keys seems to be implied from the similarity of the binding/loosing language with Matthew 16. The second similarity draws an even tighter connection between the two passages: these are the only two places in the Gospel of Matthew—and, indeed, in any of the Gospels—where the word “church” appears (Matt. 16:18; 18:17). For this reason, the Reformed have recognized two fundamental “keys” of the authority of the church in the form of doctrine and discipline. Calvin explains this well:

Both are alike in this first respect; each is a general statement; in both is always the same power of binding and loosing (that is, through God’s Word), the same command, the same promise. But they differ in this respect: the first passage [Matt. 16:19] is particularly concerned with the preaching which the ministers of the Word execute; the latter [Matt. 18] applies to the discipline of excommunication which is entrusted to the church. But the church binds him whom it excommunicates—not that it casts him into everlasting ruin and despair, but because it condemns his life and morals, and already warns him of his condemnation unless he should repent. It looses him whom it receives into communion, for it makes him a sharer of the unity which it has in Christ Jesus.²²

We will study this topic more when we come to the language in Matthew 18.

This passage closes on an intriguing note that transitions well into the following passage: “Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ” (v. 20). There is much more to clarify, but Jesus’ commendation to Peter signifies that Peter has correctly recognized something of profound importance. We will study this more in the following passage.

Discussion Questions

1. Where is Caesarea Philippi (v.13a)? Why do you think that the events of this extraordinary passage take place in pagan, Gentile territory? Why does Jesus ask his disciples who the people say that the Son of Man is (v. 13b)? What kind of answers do the people give? From these answers, what is the general consensus about Jesus? How close do these answers come to the truth? Why do you

²⁰ William Perkins, “A Discourse of Conscience,” in *The Works of William Perkins*, ed. J. Stephen Yuille, ed. Joel R. Beeke and Derek W. H. Thomas (1596; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2019), 27.

²¹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:292.

²² Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1214 (§4.11.2).

think these answers fall short of the truth?

2. Why does Jesus ask his disciples who they believe that he is (v. 15)? What does it mean for Peter to say that Jesus is the “Christ” (v. 16)? What does the word “Christ” mean? Does the office of “Christ” point to Jesus’ human nature or to his divine nature? What does the phrase “Son of the living God” mean? Does this point to Jesus’ human nature or to his divine nature? How close do these answers come to the truth? Why does Peter know what the crowds do not?

3. What does Jesus mean by the wordplay between “Peter” and “rock” (v. 18)? When Jesus says to Peter, “on this rock I will build my church,” does Jesus assign Peter (and the church in Rome that Peter founded) any kind of primacy over the other churches? Why or why not? If not, then what do you believe that Jesus is actually saying in these words? How do these words shape the way that we structure the church today?

4. What does Jesus mean when he speaks about the keys to the kingdom of heaven (v. 19)? What does Jesus mean when he speaks about binding and loosing? What is the connection between this passage and Matthew 18:18? Why do theologians use these passages to suggest two keys: the key of doctrine, and the key of discipline? How are those similar? How are they different? If the church possesses these keys, what should your response be to the authority of the church?